

Interpersonal relationships among ethnic migrants in education: Assessing the effectiveness of special support programs

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Abstract

This study examines the effectiveness of a targeted program designed to foster favorable interpersonal relationships among returnee students within the student body. It addresses contemporary challenges faced by returnees in developing interpersonal connections in a new educational environment and identifies a research gap concerning structured interventions to support their social adaptation. The objective was to assess the nature of interpersonal dynamics among returnee students and explore strategies to optimize their integration through a specialized programmed. The research employed a survey-based methodology to collect data on group cohesion, sociometric status, and interpersonal tensions among returnees. A total of 107 first-year students participated, revealing low levels of interpersonal connectedness, elevated tension, and indications of destructive interpersonal processes. These findings underscored the need for an intervention that could improve returnees' social functioning within the academic community. The results demonstrated that participation in the structured programmed positively influenced group dynamics and interpersonal engagement. The study contributes to the understanding of how educational institutions can support the psychosocial development of returnee students through targeted, evidence-based programming.

Keywords: adaptation; group cohesion; interpersonal relationships; returnee students; social adaptation

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1. INTRODUCTION

The problem of repatriation and the related issues of adaptation and integration of repatriates in a new social and educational space for them have always been and remain highly relevant throughout the world. The problem of repatriation is always associated with the solution of problems and the implementation of necessary measures for transportation, accommodation, resettlement, and provision of sociopolitical, economic, cultural, and educational conditions for their successful adaptation to their historical homeland (Lang et al., 2021).

Previous research has indicated that returnee students are more than just a return to a country of origin; it is a return to home and community (Cheung & Xu, 2015). Bulmer (2020) puts forward the hypothesis that adaptation is complicated by restructuring mental activity. First of all, problems in adaptation are experienced by young people who came to study from another locality, who find themselves cut off from their parents, the usual way of life of the family, and the environment (de Nava, 2017).

Based on all of the above, it can be concluded that the adaptation of students to a university is a complex and multifactorial process (Dwiningrum et al., 2021). In the traditional plan, the adaptation of students is considered a combination of three aspects reflecting the main areas of student activity (Lee & Ciftci, 2014): adaptation to the conditions of the educational activity, adaptation to the group, and adaptation to the future profession. In real life, these aspects are inextricably linked. The research on the sociocultural environment and the learning environment (Ng et al., 2017), the formation of interpersonal relationships as a factor of effective adaptation and successful adaptation is developing quite productively at the present stage.

The authors of the research agree with the opinion that in group interaction, interpersonal relationships are formed based on mutual cognition, mutual evaluations, and cooperation (Zhang et al., 2024; Cipriano et al., 2019; Moradi et al., 2018; Wanders et al., 2020). Thus, modern researchers reveal the issue of the development of interpersonal relationships from various sides: positions of individuals in a group based on moral, behavioral, business, communicative and other qualities (sociometric, refractometric and other statuses); the system of values and norms of the group's activity; a socio-psychological climate that ensures consistency and satisfaction in the activities of the group members; conflicts in relationships; and the nature of conflicts (Forbush & Foucault-Welles, 2016).

1.1. Conceptual background

In Kazakhstan, large numbers of returnee students from various countries annually arrive in their historical homeland to pursue higher education. According to data from the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan, during the 2017–2018 academic year, approximately 13,800 returnee students were enrolled in Kazakhstani universities. Of these, 7,800 originated from countries within the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), including 3,600 from Uzbekistan, 1,300 from Turkmenistan, and 1,075 from Russia. Among non-CIS countries, the largest groups came from India (3,200), China (1,200), and Afghanistan (506) (Mukanov, 2018). These figures demonstrate that returnee students constitute a significant segment of the academic community in Kazakhstani higher education institutions (Valieva et al., 2019).

Despite this, Kazakhstani universities remain insufficiently prepared to support the academic and socio-cultural integration of returnee students (Bokayev & Zharkynbekova, 2011). This lack of preparedness extends to teaching staff with limited experience in working with repatriates, administrative personnel who often fail to accommodate the specific needs of newly arrived students, peers who may respond with misunderstanding or hostility, and infrastructural limitations within the educational environment. Time is required to establish adequate educational conditions for returnee students, although their motivation to integrate into the host society may facilitate more rapid social absorption of communities historically isolated from Kazakhstan.

The adaptation of returnee students occurs across three interrelated domains:

- Academic training – addressing gaps in foundational university-level subjects.
- Social communication – developing constructive interpersonal relationships with both instructors

and peers (Sun & Wang, 2024).

- Cultural assimilation – fostering the internalization of societal norms and cultural expectations prevalent in Kazakhstan.

However, the adaptation process is frequently challenged by a range of systemic and individual factors (Bokayev et al., 2012; Zhanbossinova et al., 2019). These challenges align with prior findings (Zavalko & Nurgaliyeva, 2008), which highlight the insufficient preparedness of returnee students in selecting appropriate academic programs and future career paths (Bokayev et al., 2014). Many returnees report pursuing higher education primarily to obtain a diploma, rather than based on informed academic or professional objectives. Variations in pedagogical approaches across countries contribute to academic disengagement, difficulties in knowledge assessment, and unrealistic expectations toward local educators (Jonbekova, 2020). Furthermore, the limited theoretical exploration of returnee students' interpersonal integration negatively impacts practical outcomes in university settings. The current study addresses these gaps in existing scholarship.

The study has been designed in response to the contradiction between the need to develop favorable interpersonal relationships among returnee students in the student collective and the insufficient elaboration of theoretical provisions and recommendations for the purposeful development of favorable interpersonal relationships of returnee students in the student collective, ensuring the positive development of their personality in the process of professional training and long-term adaptation of returnees. Despite numerous theoretical and empirical studies by Kazakhstani researchers (Bokayev et al., 2021), many problems associated with the adaptation of repatriates to a host multicultural society remain unresolved. Thus, the quantitative increase in manifestations of emotional rejection, on the one hand, and the surge in the conflict-generating behavior of repatriates with each other and also representatives of the host society, on the other, indicate that the existing scientific ideas require their rethinking and revision by modern realities.

1.2. Purpose of study

The present study aimed to expand the understanding of interpersonal relationship dynamics that contribute to mitigating challenges in the academic training of returnee students in higher education institutions. Specifically, the study proposed the hypothesis that addressing destructive processes in the personal development of returnees requires the identification of sociometric status and conflict behavior strategies. Based on these findings, a set of supportive conditions was established, including teacher professional development focused on working with returnee students, implementation of targeted training programs, the introduction of tutor-led guidance, and the organization of extracurricular activities. These interventions were designed to positively influence student behavior, improve sociometric indicators such as group cohesion and sociometric status, and alter patterns of conflict behavior. As a result, the interventions contribute to the reduction of interpersonal tension and competitive dynamics among returnee students (Fang et al., 2025).

2. METHOD AND MATERIALS

2.1. Participants

The study involved first-year students from the Caspian University of Technology and Engineering named after Sh. Yessenov, the Humanitarian and Technical University, the Polytechnic College, and the Accounting and Technology College (n = 107), comprising 47 female and 60 male participants. The age range of the returnee students was 19 to 20 years, with an average age of 19.6 years. The research was conducted in the Republic of Kazakhstan in 2019. The average duration of residence in Kazakhstan among the returnee participants was 1.5 years.

2.2. Data collection instrument

Prior to the main phase of the research, an initial analysis of student life activity was carried out through observation and document review. A preliminary examination of the functions and structural conditions of the student collective was conducted. Contact was established with group members to present the objectives of the study. The most significant situations relevant to the group's primary goals and functions were identified through an expert survey.

2.3. Data analysis

The survey was conducted with student groups that had engaged in at least six months of educational activity, during which stable relationships had already developed among members. The researchers prepared a list of respondents in each group, assigning a specific identification number (code) to each participant. Each participant received a card containing a title, instructions (including the number of required selections and the method for completing the election column), and space for legible signatures. On the card, respondents indicated their attitudes toward other group members based on selected criteria.

Key sociometric questions included:

- a) If all group members lived in a hostel, with whom would you prefer to share a room?
- b) If the entire group were to be reformed, which member would you prefer not to retain in the group?

Participants were instructed to choose only four or five individuals. Questions suggesting rejection, such as "Whom would you like to see least of all?" were deliberately excluded from the procedure. This was because subjective connections in the first year of shared education are often diffuse, and answers to such questions might foster conflict. Rejecting one individual could imply active resentment, while ignoring or rejecting someone's choice might simply indicate insufficient contact to form a close relationship.

In addition, the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument (Kilmann & Thomas, 1977) was employed, which proved to be a powerful tool for managing interpersonal conflicts. Internal validity of the methodology was assessed with a sample of 107 participants. The instrument presented 30 pairs of conflict behavior options, from which participants were asked to choose the one most aligned with their behavior. Participants were advised that there were no right or wrong answers, encouraging thoughtful and honest responses, as the reliability of the results depended on this. The participants' responses were recorded in tables.

The total score on each scale indicated the participant's tendency to display certain conflict behaviors. The analysis was based on two dimensions:

- Behavior that considers the interests of others;
- Behavior focused on protecting personal interests, ignoring the interests and goals of others.

Based on various combinations of these behaviors, five distinct conflict resolution styles were identified:

- Competing (Administrative Type) – The desire to achieve personal interests at the expense of others.
- Accommodating – The sacrifice of personal interests for the benefit of others, in contrast to competing.
- Compromising (Economic Type) – A balanced approach where both parties make concessions.
- Avoiding (Traditional Type) – Characterized by a lack of cooperation and a failure to pursue personal goals.
- Collaborating (Corporate Type) – A cooperative approach where both parties arrive at a solution that fully satisfies the interests of both.

3. RESULTS

Table 1 shows the choice of strategies of behavior in a conflict situation for returnee students with different sociometric statuses from the Caspian University of Technology and Engineering named after Sh. Yessenov, Polytechnic College, and Accounting and Technology College.

TABLE 1

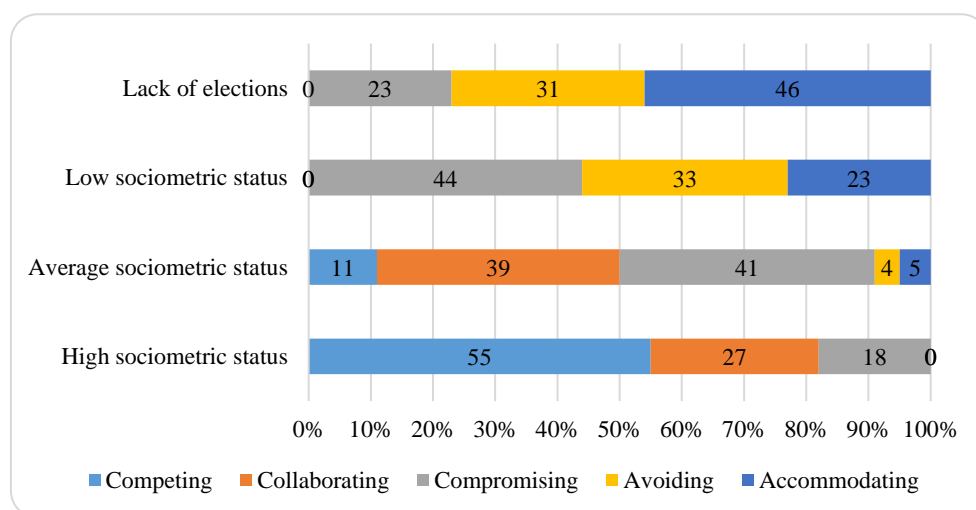
Election of strategies of behavior in a conflict situation of returnee students with different sociometric statuses

Sociometric status	Personality behavior in a conflict situation									
	Competing		Collaborating		Compromising		Avoiding		Accommodating	
	(n)	(%)	(n)	(%)	(n)	(%)	(n)	(%)	(n)	(%)
Caspian University of Technology and Engineering named after Sh. Yessenov (group 1, N = 25)										
High (stars)	2	100	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Average (accepted)	2	17	6	50	4	33	0	0	0	0
Low (outsiders)	0	0	0	0	7	78	1	11	1	11
Lack of elections	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	100
Polytechnic College (group 2, N = 29)										
High (stars)	2	100	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Average (accepted)	2	17	6	50	4	33	0	0	0	0
Low (outsiders)	0	0	0	0	7	78	1	11	1	11
Lack of elections	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	100
Group 'A' of the Accounting and Technology College (group 3, N=27)										
High (stars)	1	33.3	1	33.3	1	33.3	0	0	0	0
Average (accepted)	2	20	4	40	3	30	0	0	1	10
Low (outsiders)	0	0	0	0	3	25	5	41.7	4	3.3
Lack of elections	0	0	0	0	1	50	1	50	0	0
Group 'B' of the Accounting and Technology College (group 4, N=26)										
High (stars)	2	100	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Average (accepted)	0	0	2	25	3	37.5	2	25	1	12.5
Low (outsiders)	0	0	0	0	3	33.3	4	44.4	2	22.3
Lack of elections	0	0	0	0	2	28.6	2	28.6	3	42.8

The choice of a strategy of behavior in a conflict situation for returnee students with different sociometric statuses is shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Choice of behavior strategies in a conflict situation for returnee students with different sociometric statuses



In all the tested groups, the cohesion indicator turned out to be low (group 1 = 0.14, group 2 = 0.098, group 3 = 0.091, and group 4 = 0.087).

According to the results, students with an average sociometric status made up the largest number (44 people). There are 39 people with a low sociometric status and 11 people with a high sociometric status. Also, 13 respondents were found with no elections. The observed conflicts and competing moods in the group of students hindered the integration processes and, thus, could contribute to the emergence of problems in interpersonal interaction.

The following correlations were identified between conflict resolution methods and sociometric status. Students with high sociometric status most frequently selected the competing method (55%), followed by collaborating (27%) and compromising (18%). Students with average sociometric status favored the following methods of conflict resolution: competing (11%), compromising (41%), and collaborating (39%), with a smaller proportion selecting avoiding (4.5%) and accommodating (4.5%). Students with low sociometric status were more likely to choose compromising (43.5%), avoiding (33%), and accommodating (23%). Finally, students with a lack of election choices tended to select accommodating (46%), avoiding (30%), and compromising (23.5%) as their conflict resolution strategies.

After creating certain conditions and testing the programmed, in all the tested groups the cohesion indicator (0–1) changed from low values to above average and high values: in group 1, from 0.14 to 0.85; in group 2, from 0.098 to 0.68; in group 3, from 0.091 to 0.72; and in group 4, from 0.087 to 0.78.

To test the hypotheses put forward, after testing the programmed to assess the differences in the choice of strategies in a conflict situation, the statistical Mann–Whitney U-test was used. Indicators of the respondents at different stages with different sociometric statuses and methods of conflict resolution are presented in Table 2.

Table 2

Indicators at different stages of respondents with different sociometric statuses and methods of conflict resolution

Sociometric status	Method of conflict resolution	N	Ascertaining stage rank	Control stage rank	U_{Emp}	$U_{critical}, p \leq 0.01$	$U_{critical}, p \leq 0.05$
High (stars)	Competing	11	166.5	86.5	20.5	25	34
	Collaborating	11	80.5	172.5	14.5		
	Compromising	11	72.5	180.5	20.5		
Average (accepted)	Competing	44	2026.5	1889.5	899.5	688	770
	Collaborating	44	1538	2378	548		
	Compromising	44	1533	2383	543		
Low (outsiders)	Avoiding*	-	-	-	-	527	595
	Compromising	39	1313.5	1767.5	533.5		
	Avoiding	39	1881.5	1199.5	419.5		
	Accommodating	39	1828.5	1252.5	472.5		
Lack of elections	Compromising	13	160.5	190.5	69.5	39	51
	Avoiding	13	232	119	28		
	Accommodating	13	229.5	121.5	30.5		

‘Note’. ^a For average sociometric status and the ‘Avoiding’ method of conflict resolution, the Mann–Whitney U test was not applied due to the limited number of identified respondents.

4. DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to assess the impact of a specially designed programmed on the effectiveness of the development of favorable interpersonal relationships among returnee students in the student body. The research results supported our hypothesis. As expected, to eliminate destructive processes in the development of a returnee’s personality in the process of professional training, the sociometric status (Vidal et al., 2018) and strategies of behavior in a conflict situation among returnee students are revealed and conditions are organized (advanced training of teachers for working with repatriates, a training programmed,

work of a tutor, extracurricular activities), which change the behavior of students and indicators of sociometric characteristics (cohesion of the group, sociometric status) and behavior in conflict, which neutralizes the tension and open competition among returnee students.

Previous studies have demonstrated that measures aimed at fostering favorable interpersonal relationships among returnee students contribute significantly to their successful adaptation at universities, creating psychologically comfortable conditions (Anderman & Kaplan, 2008; Benita et al., 2014). Additionally, research indicates that a key factor in the success of a student's academic engagement is the comfort of their educational environment (Martin, 2014; Mumpuni et al., 2022; Anderson et al., 2004; Edwards et al., 2021). The emotional foundation and positive interpersonal relationships, identified as critical elements of a group's psychological climate, are central to this process (Pianta et al., 2012; Rinne, 2024). The present study's findings support these observations, illustrating that such factors positively influence returnee students during their adaptation period in Kazakhstan's higher education system.

Moreover, the organization of joint activities and the overall development of the group significantly contribute to the positive formation of interpersonal relationships (Kleptsova & Balabanov, 2016). Previous research has shown that conformity, an initial phenomenon in interpersonal relationships, reflects the type of interaction between the individual and the group (Longobardi et al., 2016; Schenke et al., 2017). It has also been found that groups impact individuals and can subordinate them to group norms and behaviors (Caprara et al., 2011). New phenomena of interpersonal relationships, such as collectivist self-determination and cohesion, emerge in this context (McGowan, 2016). These findings contribute to existing knowledge by emphasizing that one of the significant manifestations of interpersonal relationships within a team is its socio-psychological climate (Nahar, 2022).

The development of interpersonal relationships is dynamic, involving a mechanism for regulation and conditions conducive to their growth (Fernet et al., 2010). Interpersonal relationships within the student collective are influenced by human activity and largely depend on the group's stage of formation. These relationships are emotionally and personally significant, impacting the psychological climate of the group, which in turn reflects the satisfaction of its members with the collective (Jerome et al., 2009). Given the limited number of studies examining the interpersonal relationships of returnee students during their adaptation to university life, further research is necessary to expand upon these findings.

Despite the novel contributions of this study, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the current study is correlational and cross-sectional, making it difficult to establish causal relationships between variables. During the early stages of university, a student collective is formed, and favorable relationships between returnee students and peers from other faculties, as well as active involvement in university youth movements, may facilitate the development of positive interpersonal relationships, thereby optimizing the adaptation process (Frisby et al., 2020). Future longitudinal research will help clarify the direction of these relationships and their impact on adaptation outcomes. Second, the current findings may not be generalizable to other groups of temporarily residing students in different regions of Kazakhstan, as local students may encounter fewer adaptation challenges. The restructuring process is influenced by individual characteristics, such as those related to higher nervous activity (Ahmed et al., 2010; Ford et al., 2020). Understanding these individual differences is critical in preventing maladjustment and successfully fostering a cohesive student collective (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008).

Therefore, transforming the student group into a cohesive team and introducing newcomers to collective student life is crucial. This process can be seen as an active influence by educators on student relationships through the creation of special situations aimed at altering the group's structure and content (Dowson & McInerney, 2003; Leighton et al., 2022; Brackett et al., 2005). Special attention should be given to the organization of classroom and extracurricular activities that accommodate the unique characteristics of the student group (Wang & Eccles, 2013).

5. CONCLUSION

Tajibayeva, Z., Nurgaliyeva, S., Abdullayeva, P., Almagul, B., & Zhangilash, B. (2025). Interpersonal relationships among ethnic migrants in education: Assessing the effectiveness of special support programs. *Global Journal of Sociology: Current Issues*, 15(1), 1-11. <https://doi.org/10.18844/gjs.v15i1.9689>

Our The findings of this study indicate that targeted measures aimed at fostering favorable interpersonal relationships among repatriates within the student body significantly contribute to their motivation to engage in the educational process. These efforts facilitate the positive development of their personalities during vocational training.

However, there are some limitations in the current study. This research focused on returnee students from regional educational institutions in Western Kazakhstan, meaning it did not encompass all regions of Kazakhstan. Future research should aim to include a comprehensive overview of all regions to provide a more complete summary of the research findings.

Additionally, this study can be expanded or replicated in future research efforts. A key area for further investigation is the role of the host university in facilitating the social and psychological adaptation of returnee students and its influence on their selection of transformation and training strategies. Furthermore, examining adaptation strategies in relation to ethnic affiliation, as it pertains to individual and group self-awareness, as well as the individual psychological characteristics of repatriates, would provide valuable insights into their adaptation process.

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Ethical Approval: The study adheres to the ethical guidelines for conducting research.

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