

**SOCIO-PSYCHOLOGICAL  
FACTORS REGULATING  
THE LEARNING  
MOTIVATION IN FOREIGN STUDENTS**

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**Abstract.** This study examined the relationship of learning motivation in foreign students with the process of their socio-cultural adaptation and individual psychological characteristics. The concept of “learning motivation” was clarified and the factors hindering the process of forming the learning motivation in foreign students in the Ukrainian-speaking environment were analysed. It was expected that learning motivation in foreign students has its own specifics and differs from the level and dynamics of this motivation in Ukrainian students. In addition, the author examined the differences in correlations between the learning motivation, level of self-esteem, level of aspirations, acculturation strategies, and the scale of perceived discrimination among the foreign and Ukrainian students.

Students of Odessa universities (40 Ukrainian host society members and 34 immigrants to Ukraine) participated in the questionnaire study.

The findings revealed that the main learning motives in foreign students include intrapersonal motives and the motives for acquiring knowledge, mastering a profession and getting a diploma. International students are quite susceptible to the influence of assessments by teachers, which can be used to increase their learning motivation.

**Key words:** learning motivation, self-esteem, level of aspirations, acculturation strategies.

**Formulation of the research problem.** The beginning of the XXI century became a new stage in the development of interpersonal relations for the modern mankind. This is primarily due to the intensification of interethnic contacts (economic, political and educational migration), which resulted in intensive reciprocity of different cultures. In the context of the tendency to increasing intercultural communication and interpenetration of cultures, problems associated with the adaptation of foreign students to a foreign environment and the establishment of effective intercultural relations become especially relevant.

At the moment, Ukraine is a multicultural and multi-confessional country, for which academic mobility of students has become an important characteristic of the system of higher professional education.

For the success of the educational process in the polyethnic educational environment it is necessary to solve a rather difficult task of organizing the educational process with consideration of cultural differences, establishing direct interethnic contacts in the joint activity of representatives of different cultures, ability and readiness of individuals to change their status, place of residence, the presence of constructive intercultural interaction skills and high motivation to learning. In a broader sense, this problem is associated with the process of socio-cultural adaptation. It is very important to understand the feelings of a foreign student who finds himself in a new social, political and economic environment, what help he or she needs in the process of adaptation to new conditions and in raising his/her level of mastering professional knowledge.

Each foreign student obviously has a system of adopted norms, attitudes and values of his own culture, reflects the traditions and customs of the ethnic group in which he or she was brought up. In this regard, not only the educational motivation of foreign students in Ukraine, but also their socio-cultural adaptation, both in the context of interpersonal relations and cultural norms, and in the context of the educational process, is of a great interest.

The problem of forming the learning motivation is one of the central issues in pedagogy and psychology; a considerable number of works were devoted to it (L. I. Bozhovich, A. S. Grebenyuk, E. P. Ilyin, A. A. Leontiev, A. K. Markov, D. L. Melamed, M. V. Ovchinnikov, A. A. Rean et al.). A great contribution to the study of the socio-psychological conditions of educational activity was made by G. M. Andreeva, A. V. Petrovsky, A. S. Chernysheva, V. A. Yadov and others. However, despite a significant number of works, the problem of relationships between the students' sociocultural adaptation and learning motivation remains poorly understood. This fact indicates the lack of knowledge and the need for further study of this problem.

Thus, the **purpose of this research** is to study the socio-psychological determinants of the learning motivation in foreign students.

**An analysis of recent research and publications on the issue.**

The problem of research of motivation in general and motivation to educational activity, in particular, is relevant both in the domestic and in

foreign psychology. For the first time the word ‘*motivation*’ was used in A. Schopenhauer’s article “On the Fourfold Root of the Principle of Sufficient Reason”. Later this term firmly entered into psychological use to explain the causes of human and animal behaviour (E. P. Ilyin: 2004).

Currently, within the framework of psychology, as indicated by many well-known specialists (V. A. Ivannikov, E. P. Ilyin 2004; V. I. Kovalev 2001; H. Heckhausen 2003; L. Huell, D. Ziegler 2003; etc.), a common understanding of the nature of motives, the possibility of being aware of them, their actualization and purposeful formation has not yet formed. In one case, motivation is treated as a set of factors that support and guide, that is, determine behaviour (K. Madsen, Jo Godefroid), in another case – as a set of motives (K. K. Platonov), in the third – as an incentive that causes an organism’s activity and determines its orientation (V. K. Vilyunas; E. P. Ilyin 2004).

All the definitions of motivation in psychology can be divided into two broad categories. In the first one, motivation is viewed from the structural position, as a combination of factors or motives. According to V. D. Shadrikov’s scheme, motivation is determined by the person’s needs and goals, the level of his/her aspirations and ideals, the conditions of activity, his/her knowledge, skills, abilities, character, worldview, beliefs and his/her personality orientation. These factors determine decision-making and the formation of intentions. The second category of definitions considers motivation not as static, but as a dynamic formation, as a process (Shadrikov 2001).

E. P. Ilyin in his book “Motivations and Motives” highlights a number of approaches to understanding the concept of motive (E. P. Ilyin 2004). In the works of some authors, the motive is interpreted as a need (L. I. Bozhovich, A. G. Kovalev, K. K. Platonov, S. L. Rubinstein), by others – as a goal (A. Leontiev), while still others understand it as an intention (L. I. Bozhovich), a personal disposition (K. K. Platonov, V. S. Merlin, M. Sh. Magomed-Eminov), a condition (R. A. Piloyan, A. M. Meyerovich), or satisfaction (V. G. Aseev, A. G. Kovalev, P. M. Yakobson).

Literature analysis shows that the main approaches, within which models of learning motivation are developed, are behavioural, humanistic, cognitive, socio-cognitive and activity-based (Pavlova 2006).

Representatives of the *behavioural approach* (C. Hull, E. Thorndike, B. Skinner) disclaim motivation in their theories, replacing it

with acts of external stimulation. They proceed from the idea that human behaviour is always a reaction to environmental stimuli (Sushko 2006).

Adherents of the *humanistic approach* assign a major role in the motivation of behaviour to the need for self-actualization (E. Fromm, C. Goldstein, C. Rogers, A. Maslow, and others). According to A. Maslow, each person strives for self-actualization to a different extent and in different ways. A human being strives to become who he/she can potentially be, this motivation drives him/her to development (Maslow 2003).

Supporters of the *cognitive approach* argue that human actions depend not so much on external stimuli as on their interpretation, understanding and evaluation. This can be traced in the theories of “expectation – value”, describing motivation as a function of the person’s assessment of the possibilities of achieving the goal and the value of the goal itself (J. Atkinson, H. Hekhausen, V. Weiner, J. Rotter) (Hekhausen 2003).

In the *socio-cognitive approach* to the motivation, behaviour is considered as the result of constant interaction between the individual and the external environment (A. Bandura, M. Cavington, E. Elliott) (Bandura 2000).

In general, learning motivation is a whole range of cognitive and emotional processes that help a student to learn something new. The intensity of a student’s learning motivation depends on the changing interrelations between his/her personal qualities (skills and motivational characteristics) and the stimuli of the situation, which the teachers can influence (Stangl 2018).

Learning motivation, like any other kind of motivation, has a systemic nature. It is characterized by directionality, stability and dynamism. The general structure of learning motivation is formed by the need, the meaning of learning, its purpose, the student’s interests, desires, intentions, and tasks.

The main task of modern universities is to organize such educational activities, which would maximally contribute to the disclosure of an individual student’s internal motivational potential, which in turn helps to promote his/her personal competence and adequacy, increase his self-esteem and self-affirmation of his nature.

On the one hand, the culture, values and attitudes of their home country, and on the other, the sociocultural reality of the country of study (stay), influence the formation of the learning motivation in foreign students.

The process of adaptation of foreign students to learning becomes a complex dynamic, multilevel and multilateral process of transforming a student's need-motivational sphere, the complex of his existing skills, abilities and habits in accordance with new conditions. It includes many aspects such as: adaptation to new climatic conditions and time, to a new educational system, to a new language of communication, to the international nature of study groups, to a new culture, etc.

The study of specific features of relations between the learning motivation in foreign students and their sociocultural adaptation and socio-psychological characteristics is of particular relevance. The knowledge of these relations can increase the productivity of the foreign students' learning activities.

### **Questions and hypothesis**

In this study, we consider that the socio-psychological qualities important for adaptation are: the personality orientation, self-esteem, and level of aspirations. The indicator of sociocultural adaptation is the index of the foreign students' acculturation attitudes. Thus, the objects of this study include the personality socio-psychological characteristics, the learning motivation, perceived discrimination, attitudes to social equality, and acculturation attitudes in students.

*Hypothesis 1:* We assume that the learning motivation in foreign students has specifics and is different from the level and dynamics of motivation in Ukrainian students.

*Hypothesis 2:* We assume that the dynamics of learning motivation in foreign students is related to the process of their sociocultural adaptation. Having found themselves in a new social and cultural environment, in order to overcome anxiety, the first and second year students immerse more in the learning process, thus avoiding the unfamiliar new environment. By the last course, they adapt to the new environment and begin to pay more attention to social contacts, moving away from learning activities.

*Hypothesis 3:* We assume that foreign students have learning motives associated with the level of self-esteem and the level of aspirations, and also with acculturation strategies, the level of perceived discrimination and attitudes towards social equality. For Ukrainian students, learning motivation is more related to the level of self-esteem and the level of aspirations.

### Participants

The sample of investigation consisted of two groups of students: foreign students studying in Ukrainian universities, and Ukrainian students living in Ukraine. In total, 74 students took part in the study, 34 of them foreign (Azerbaijanis, Chinese and Arabs) and 40 Ukrainian. By gender, the subjects were distributed as follows: 48 (57.8%) males, and 35 (42.2%) females; by age: under 20 years – 36.1%, from 21 to 25 years – 34.9%, over 26 years – 29%.

This survey was based on anonymous use of questionnaires including: “Learning Motivation in Higher School” by T. I. Ilyin; “Survey on the Students’ Motives to Learning Activities” by A. A. Rean and V. A. Yakunin; Dembo-Rubinstein’ self-esteem assessment method; J. Berry’s Acculturation Strategies Scale; J. Berry’s Ethnic Tolerance Scale; and The Scale of Perceived Discrimination by N. M. Lebedev.

### Analysis of the research results

To confirm Hypothesis 1, t-test was applied (Table 1). The results of the study on specific features of the learning motivation in foreign and Ukrainian students show highly significant differences in the internal learning motives, educational motives, cognitive motives, and motives for mastering a profession and acquiring knowledge. Foreign students have higher values of these indices. Therefore, it can be noted that foreign students in our sample were more motivated to study than Ukrainian ones. An analysis of standard deviations also shows that foreign students have less variation in these indices, that is, they are more unanimous in their pursuit of studies than their Ukrainian peers.

**Table 1.**  
**Differences in learning motivation in foreign and Ukrainian students**

| Parameters                   | Foreigners |      | Ukrainians |      | t      |
|------------------------------|------------|------|------------|------|--------|
|                              | M          | SD   | M          | SD   |        |
| 1. Achievement motivation    | 12.4       | 2.15 | 12.3       | 3.06 |        |
| 2. Internal learning motives | 24.6       | 3.43 | 22.5       | 4.81 | 2.13** |
| 3. External learning motives | 20         | 4,1  | 20         | 5,2  |        |
| 4. Educational motives       | 23,6       | 4,44 | 19,8       | 5,6  | 2,43** |
| 5. Cognitive motives         | 25         | 3,6  | 23         | 4,5  | 1,98** |

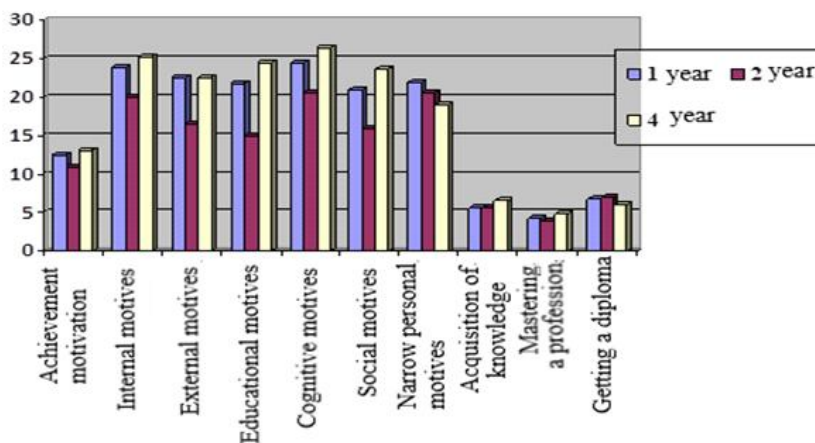
## Изследване и практика

|                             |      |      |      |      |        |
|-----------------------------|------|------|------|------|--------|
| 6. Social motives           | 20   | 4,5  | 20   | 5,4  |        |
| 7. Narrow personal motives  | 22,1 | 3,74 | 21,1 | 4,22 |        |
| 8. Acquisition of knowledge | 6,65 | 2,59 | 5,42 | 3,14 | 2,08*  |
| 9. Mastering a profession   | 5,84 | 2,38 | 3,84 | 2,44 | 2,67** |
| 10. Getting a diploma       | 7,24 | 2,06 | 6,77 | 2,09 |        |

*Note: M – the mean index; SD - standard deviation.*

For a more differentiated analysis and confirmation of Hypothesis 2, the t-test of the learning motives dynamics with regard to the year of study was applied.

The histogram in Fig. 1 shows the dynamics of learning motives among Ukrainian students. For them the second year of study is critical regarding the learning motivation. This is manifested by a sharp decrease in the intensity of the learning motives, especially the internal, external and educational components.



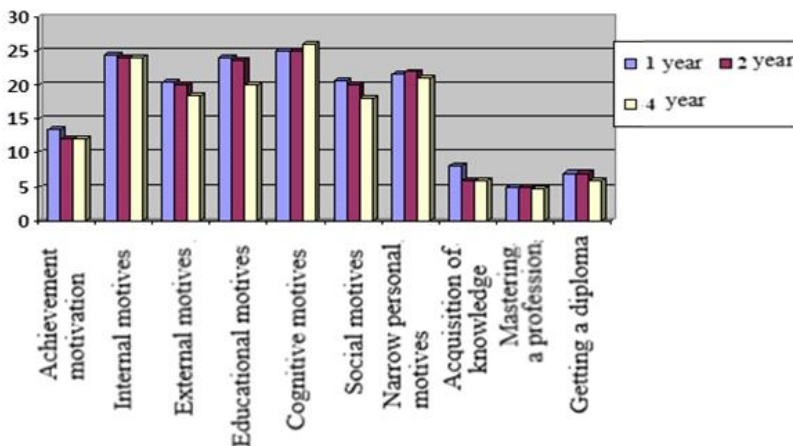
**Figure 1.** The dynamics of learning motives in Ukrainian students according to years of study

The application of Student's t-test to the obtained results showed that the levels of internal, external, and educational motives were

significantly reduced in the second year students. The differences between the indices were statistically significant at the 1% and 5% significance levels. In the 4th year students, the intensity of the cognitive motive was significantly higher; a general increase in motivation was also noticeable.

This general dynamics of learning motivation according to the years of study can be characterized as follows. On entering a university, the 1st year students are still fascinated by their expectations and experiences of university entrance and meeting new people. During the 2nd year of study many students feel disappointment caused by some dissonance of reality with their previous expectations. During the 4th year, the professional orientation of training becomes most topical for the students; this causes an increase in the cognitive motive.

A somewhat different dynamics of the learning motivation was observed among foreign students.



**Figure 2. The dynamics of learning motives in foreign students according to years of study**

Comparative analysis with Student's t-test showed that the intensity of learning motives was more stable and had no pronounced differences from course to course. It can be noted that the intensity of learning motives during the first, second and fourth years had a similar dynamics to that of



the Ukrainian students (with the exception of narrow personal motives), but by the 4th year the educational motivation decreased.

The histogram shows that during the 1st and 2nd years foreign students have a fairly stable learning motivation, with the exception of achievement motive, which decreases during the 2nd year and later returns to the same high level again. This can be associated with some loss of self-confidence in the 2nd year of study. However, during the 4th year, a collapse takes place: the foreign students have a decreased level of external, internal, educational and social motives; they lose their desire even to master a profession and get a diploma.

The results of comparative analysis show that the dynamics of learning motivation among Ukrainian students are in good agreement with the ideas of P. Hersey and C. Blanchard concerning the development of groups and individuals according to their situational theory of leadership (Blanchard 2002); it can be called 'normal'. However, the dynamics of motivation in foreign students has a different nature, which could be called 'abnormal'. This is probably due to the fact that Ukrainian students are in a familiar, native socio-cultural environment and don't experience additional adaptation load. Therefore, their learning dynamics proceeds in accordance with the typical dynamics of group and individual processes. Unlike them, foreign students, in addition to setting to a new type of activities (studying at the university), also bear the psychological burden of secondary socio-cultural adaptation. An interesting fact is that the first and second year foreign students concentrate primarily on learning. Having found themselves in a different socio-cultural environment, foreign students seem to "hide" in the learning process, thus maintaining emotional balance. By the 4th year, they adjust, increase social contacts and move away from learning activities. This result confirms our hypothesis 2.

A comparative analysis of intergroup differences in the indices of socio-psychological adaptation (*self-esteem, level of aspirations, ethnic tolerance, attitudes toward social equality and perceived discrimination*) showed that foreign students were predominantly focused on interaction with other groups.

In the analysis of the foreign students' self-esteem, the highest indicators were the esteemed respect on the part of friends, self-rating of their appearance and self-rating of their self-confidence. These probably

are the most important grounds for maintaining self-esteem as a whole and the emotional well-being for a foreign student in Ukraine.

The results also show that Ukrainian students have a higher level of self-rating of respect on the part of friends, but this difference is not statistically significant.

**Table 2.**

**Differences between foreign and Ukrainian students in their socio-psychological characteristics.**

| Parameters                                     | Foreigners |       | Ukrainians |      |
|--|------------|-------|------------|------|
|  | M          | SD    | M          | SD   |
| LA regarding intellect                         | 48         | 5,3   | 49         | 6,5  |
| LA regarding respect on the part of friends    | 49         | 5,7   | 48         | 7,3  |
| LA regarding respect on the part of teachers   | 47         | 6,7   | 44         | 9,5  |
| LA regarding academic success                  | 48,2       | 5,91  | 46,8       | 7,51 |
| LA regarding one's appearance                  | 49         | 5,8   | 47         | 7,8  |
| LA regarding self confidence                   | 49         | 5,2   | 48         | 7,2  |
| Self-rating of intellect                       | 34         | 8,4   | 34         | 9,4  |
| Self-rating of respect on the part of friends  | 37,4       | 7,87  | 39,5       | 11   |
| Self-rating of respect on the part of teachers | 32,1       | 9,26  | 30,5       | 11,8 |
| Self-rating of academic success                | 31,42      | 9,48  | 30,9       | 10,9 |
| Self-rating of one's appearance                | 36         | 9,8   | 37         | 10   |
| Self-rating of self-confidence                 | 36,5       | 9,3   | 34,6       | 12,3 |
| General self-esteem                            | 34,6       | 6,68  | 35,34      | 8,72 |
| General level of aspirations                   | 48,3       | 4,047 | 47         | 7,1  |
| Ethnic tolerance                               | 3,2        | 2,31  | 4,03       | 3,10 |
| Social equity                                  | 3,5        | 2,43  | 4,1        | 2,68 |
| Perceived discrimination                       | 2,87       | 2,05  | 4,87       | 3,46 |

*Note:* M – mean index; SD – standard deviation; LA – level of aspirations.

Comparison of the levels of aspirations concerning the same parameters showed that the wish to gain the teachers' respect in foreigners is significantly higher than in Ukrainians (at the 5% level of statistical significance). We can conclude on these grounds that foreign students

are quite susceptible to the influence of assessment on the part of teachers, which can be used to increase their learning motivation. In the level of aspirations the most significant component is the level of aspirations in relation to intellect.

It was also revealed that among foreign students the level of ethnic tolerance and attitudes toward social equality is statistically significantly higher than in Ukrainians, which can be explained by their more pronounced need to be accepted by the dominant society, in particular, by Ukrainian students. This result is complemented by high rates of perceived discrimination in the group of foreigners. This index is the least expressed in Ukrainian students.

For a more complete analysis of the students' socio-psychological characteristics, we evaluated the strategies of intercultural interaction for each group. They reflect the well-being of foreigners in a multicultural environment and are an indicator of a student's acceptance of other groups. The results of processing the data on acculturation expectations of Ukrainian students and the foreigners' attitudes indicate that the representatives of both groups were dominated by attitudes and expectations of acculturation of the integration type (i.e., mastering the skills of both cultures). In the second place among Ukrainian and foreign students was preference of acculturation of the separation or segregation type (this strategy prevailed among foreigners). The third place belonged to the choice of assimilation or 'the melting pot' (this choice prevailed among Ukrainians). The least preferred for both groups was the strategy of marginalization (or exclusion).

Comparison of average values of the foreigners' acculturation attitudes and expectations of the Ukrainian students using Student's t-test revealed a statistically significant difference in the integration strategy indices ( $t=1.98$ ;  $p=0.01$ ) and marginality ( $t=2.201$ ;  $p=0.001$ ). Integration, as the most preferred strategy of intercultural interaction, is more popular among Ukrainian students. In turn, foreign students prefer the strategy of marginality significantly more often than Ukrainians.

Correlation analysis was applied to confirm Hypothesis 3. The results of studying the correlation between the learning motivation and the foreign and Ukrainian students' socio-psychological characteristics showed that in foreign students, achievement motivation positively correlates with self-rating of respect on the part of friends, self-rating of

respect on the part of teachers, self-rating of one's appearance and the general level of self-esteem. It was found that the level of ethnic tolerance among foreign students negatively affects the achievement motivation. In turn, self-rating of respect on the part of friends negatively correlated with external motives of learning. The higher is the need for respect on the part of friends the lower is the external motive of learning and the motivation to acquire knowledge. A positive correlation was revealed with the motive of acquiring a profession.

Negative correlation was found between age and learning motivation. The younger is the student the stronger is his/her motivation to learn. With age, this motivation tends to decrease. Cognitive motives have positive correlations with the self-rating of academic success and the level of aspirations regarding the teachers' respect. Social motives in foreign students also have a positive correlation with the self-rating of intellect, self-rating of respect on the part of friends and self-rating of academic success.

Negative correlations were found between perceived discrimination and learning motives, as well as motives to acquiring knowledge and the year of study. In first-year students, the motives for acquiring knowledge were more pronounced than in fourth-year students.

Interesting results were obtained when studying correlations between acculturation strategies and learning motives. It was established that the separation strategy negatively affects social motives in foreign students, and the assimilation strategy contributes to the motive for obtaining a diploma and a profession. Integration, as the most constructive strategy of sociocultural adaptation, has a positive effect on the motivation for achievement and the external motives of learning in foreign students. By contrast, the strategy of marginalization, which indicates the loss of one's cultural values and lack of identification both with old and new cultures, has a negative impact on external motives for learning.

Correlation analysis of the data received from the group of Ukrainian students showed that almost all scales of self-esteem and level of aspirations had a positive correlation with the levels of achievement motivation, internal and external learning motives, educational and cognitive motives.

A high level of aspirations regarding respect on the part of the teachers, self-rating of respect on the part of friends and self-rating of the

teachers' respect have a positive effect on the levels of social motives. This result means that the learning activities of Ukrainian students are more integrated into the system of social and psychological relations.

Interesting correlations were established between acculturation expectations and the learning motivation in Ukrainian students. The integration strategy has a positive effect on the social motivation of Ukrainian students, and the segregation strategy has a negative effect on the motive for obtaining a diploma.

### **Conclusions**

Thus, on the basis of a stating study, supported by statistical analysis, we revealed the following: the dynamics of learning motivation in foreign students is associated with the dynamics of their sociocultural adaptation. Ukrainian and foreign students have different dynamics of learning motivation according to years of study: Ukrainian students have a crisis in their second year, but by the fourth year they have a dramatic increase in most of the components of learning motivation; in contrast, the first and second year foreign students have a steadily higher level of learning motivation than their Ukrainian peers, but in the fourth year they have a sharp decline in most components of learning motivation. We associate this noticeable decline in learning motivation in the fourth year foreign students with the growth of their adaptation to a different socio-cultural environment. In the first years of study, they rely on what is "less unknown" in this stressful situation in order to maintain emotional balance. This "less unknown" is the learning process, which is structured and associated with their previous knowledge. We can say that foreign students "hide" from an unfamiliar socio-cultural environment in the learning process. By the fourth year, they adapt to the different socio-cultural environment, dissolve in social contacts and move away from learning activities.

In foreign students, internal (intrapersonal) and narrow personal motives (cognitive, educational, motives for mastering a profession and getting a diploma) prevail among the components of learning motivation. International students are quite susceptible to the influence of assessment by teachers, which can be used to increase their learning motivation.

Summarizing the results of our analysis of the acculturation attitudes in foreigners and the acculturation expectations in Ukrainian students, we can state that in both groups the dominant strategy of intercultural

interaction is the integration strategy (for foreigners) or multiculturalism for Ukrainians.

A general correlation analysis showed that foreign students differ from their Ukrainian peers in the system of links of their learning motivation with their socio-psychological characteristics. In foreign students, learning motivation is interrelated with the level of aspirations in the contexts of intellect, learning success, and self-confidence, as well as with the level of self-rating in the contexts of intellect, learning success, self-confidence, and acculturation strategies.

The results of this study show that foreign students need psychological support which should be provided in two stages: in the first and second years they need social and psychological support and optimization of interpersonal relations with Ukrainian students, and in the fourth year psychological support should be carried out in the context of reinforcing their learning motivation.

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