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## Russian Postdocs as a New Tool for Academic Development: an HSE University Perspective

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## The Postdoctoral Program Landscape in Russia

The system of postdoctoral fellowships in Russia is relatively new; the first postdoctoral programs appeared in 2013. Their development was accelerated by the “5-100” Russian Academic Excellence Project initiated by Russian Ministry of Education and Science. Postdoctoral initiatives started to be implemented in more than 10 Russian universities including Lomonosov Moscow State University and Saint Petersburg State University.

Most programs were designed to follow the western model of postdoctoral fellowships. Originally, the aim of such programs was to attract scholars with high scientific potential and a variety of research backgrounds to carry out independent research and extend the pool of university research projects. Universities generally expect external candidates with a PhD (or its Russian equivalent, *stepen' kandidata nauk/Candidate of Sciences*), publications in high-ranking international academic journals and international experience. These researchers are aged between 26 and 39 and have advanced knowledge of English.

Conducting research is the primary task of postdocs. They can also be involved in joint research work with students and fellow scientists, and in giving open lectures and holding seminars. As a rule, the call for applications is open for foreign and Russian researchers. However, Russian universities focus their efforts on attracting international colleagues to a greater extent [1].

The positioning of postdoctoral programs in Russia is still under development and reflection. For instance, Russian universities sometimes compare it with the well-known system of *Doctorantura*, an education program for holders of a Candidate of Sciences degree who are aiming to become a Doctor of Sciences. As, for example, National Research Tomsk State University claims that “The Institute of Postdoctoral Studies at TSU replaced *Doctorantura*, familiar to all of us” [2], National Research Tomsk Polytechnic University calls its postdoctoral program “Postdoc of TPU, an analogue of *Doctorantura*” [3]. The second aim of Russian universities is to use their postdoctoral programs as a tool for international recruitment, examples of such universities include Ural Federal University, Novosibirsk State University, and Far Eastern Federal University. Russian universities currently regard postdoctoral programs as a development tool for their staff.

## Russian Postdoctoral Fellowship Program at HSE University

Generally, all postdoctoral programs, not only in Russia, aim to attract international researchers rather than domestic ones. Even if they are not citizens of foreign countries, they are expected to have a PhD from a university abroad. HSE University was the first Russian university that launched a postdoctoral program to attract national researchers. HSE University executives developed two different programs, for international postdocs and for national postdocs. The criteria for participation and pro-

gram conditions are different. The International Postdoc Fellowship Initiative was launched in 2014. This is a 3-year program for those who have PhDs from a foreign university. The Russian Postdoc Fellowship Program, launched in September 2018, is 1-year program for Russian scholars who have never worked at, or obtained a PhD from, HSE University. It is possible to extend the term for 1 more year. Here, we would like to focus on the Russian Postdoc Fellowship Program as it is a unique attempt to develop the national research system and address the challenge of inbreeding at Russian universities.

Although the program is new and it is too early to describe concrete results, we show the initial impact of the program from the perspectives of HSE University executives and Russian postdocs.

## University Executive Perspective

The Russian postdoctoral fellowship program is part of the HSE University mission to promote the development of Russian academia and research. First, the program serves as a platform to develop national intellectual exchange and university collaboration. Exchange can be very fruitful, taking into account the fact that Russia is a very large country with more than 700 universities and over 400 research institutions. They differ widely in terms of the approaches they use and the level of teaching and research. The aims of such collaboration can be a short term, the professional development of a postdoc and increasing the effectiveness of an HSE research project; or medium term, research collaboration with departments of partner universities. The program both helps strengthen the existing collaborations of HSE University and find new partners. Secondly, the program furthers the renewal of academia, bringing dynamism to a community which tends toward being staff-locked and stagnant. It is difficult to get an inflow of new ideas or to master new research approaches if there are no people with different mentalities, knowledge, skills, values, experience or contacts, who can join the research team. Thirdly, as HSE University is a leading national university in the field of mathematics and computer science, social sciences and humanities, the program further strengthens the staff of Russian educational and research organizations with the help of program alumni.

In general, there are three groups of participants. Representatives of the first, largest, group come from universities all over Russia where the research infrastructure is less developed. Members of the second group are scholars from metropolitan universities. Their aim is either to continue research in their field in a new environment or to change their research dramatically. For scholars in the third group, the Postdoctoral Program is a chance to return to academia. They are PhDs who have worked in industry but who are willing to work as researchers.

The Russian Postdoctoral Fellowship Program is a university level program. The university provides funding for the candidates who are selected, on a competitive basis, by the HSE Postdoc Committee. Their guaranteed monthly salary is determined by program conditions. The depart-

ment that was awarded an opportunity to get a postdoc is encouraged to co-finance. The postdoc also has the opportunity to join projects carried out at other HSE labs or departments. The university provides annual travel grants and the possibility of internships in addition to those that are available from the departments. Postdocs are encouraged to take part in adaptation programs and special postdoc events as well as all the social and sport facilities.

The program seems to be a win-win situation. The HSE departments where postdocs work get a motivated colleague who does not have a teaching load and who is willing to concentrate on research. Such collaboration results in the increase of the department research output; the development of interdisciplinary research projects at department and university levels; and the renewal of the university research staff. The university academic community starts to become more open-minded and flexible to the integration of new research practices and ideas.

## HSE Russian Postdoc Perspective

Approaching the end of the first 2-year cycle of the Russian Postdoctoral Fellowship Program, we conducted an investigation on the impact of the program from the program participants' perspective. The aim was to identify their initial motives and whether the program met their expectations, what impact the program has had on their future career and the reaction of their academic community, including their previous employers and colleagues, to their participation in the program. There are 45 HSE Russian postdocs, 70% took part in the survey.

Almost 100% of the respondents claimed that the participation in the program met their expectations. First, they managed to reach the academic goals they associated with immersion in a well-organized scientific environment. Secondly, 61% of participants appreciated the fact that they are now more in demand in the academic market, although, half of the respondents are still searching for jobs, since almost half (42.9%) have not yet received job offers.

Over the two years of the program, most participants developed an idea of an effectively managed, vibrant academic environment. This means the program alumni have high expectations for their next job, and this minimizes the possibility of their returning to their former employer. From the point of view of enhancing academic mobility, it may contribute to the renewal of the academic staff at universities and research organizations.

The postdoctoral position is a relatively new phenomenon for Russian universities and a program requirement is to change the primary place of employment. Termination of the employment contract has become a difficult decision for both program participants and their previous employers. Half of the employers accepted the decision of their colleagues to become an HSE postdoc and they are glad to work with the colleagues after they come back again. Other employers did not want their colleagues leave their jobs for a different research experience and they are not ready to continue their joint projects.

Despite existing institutional barriers and psychological difficulties, an important program outcome is the fact that most participants were not disappointed with their decision. If it were possible to make the same choice again, they would as the program helped them to develop professionally.

All Russian HSE postdoc alumni are planning to continue their academic careers. While working for two years at HSE University, postdocs had an opportunity to see the organizational of this university from the inside. It concerns not only scholarly communication and academic routine but also the social and management infrastructure of the HSE University community. It helped them reach a new level of understanding of high academic standards that may significantly reduce the likelihood of returning to previous jobs. Almost 60% of program participants claimed that they would like to find a position that fits their new understanding.

## Conclusion

The postdoctoral program in Russia is a new form of interaction between universities and research organizations in the free market of academic labor. It can be an effective means to address the challenge of inbreeding and stimulate rapid intellectual exchange, which can lead to fruitful research cooperation.

The experience of Russian universities shows that a unified model of postdoctoral programs is not suitable for Russia because of the country's size and specific regional characteristics. Each university uses the postdoc to address their own challenges depending on the budget, management capacities and how ready the university environment is for change. The case of HSE University shows that postdoctoral programs can be used as a means of international recruitment, a platform to nurture advanced researchers (Russian Doctors of Science) and it is possible to adjust the program to the mission and long-term goals of a university's development.

The future of postdoctoral programs may be influenced by the current situation with the COVID-19. It may change the formats of such programs to a "digital postdoc" or online research collaboration.

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# An Unrealized Postdoctoral Program: the Experience of St. Petersburg Polytechnic University

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## A focus on youth

In 2012–2015, a number of youth initiatives and projects related to the social activities of the Council of Young Scientists and Specialists were developed at St. Petersburg Polytechnic University (SPbPU), including the creation of a youth talent pool for researchers and teachers, the development of a post-doctoral program, and the contest "assistant vice-rector".

One of the main tasks of the Council was to promote professional development, the accumulation of experience and creative growth, and to realize the scientific potential of young people. Graduate students or university employees from 22 to 35 years old could provide proposals to improve and develop the scientific activities of the university by supporting young scientists. The authors of the best projects implemented their ideas, occupying the position of "assistant vice-rector" for scientific work during the year. The project to create a centralized system for recruiting postdocs at SPbPU appeared in 2013 precisely thanks to the initiatives of the "assistant vice-rector". The concept of a postdoc support program was initially experimental in nature. The leadership supported this initiative and program began to develop.

## Implementing the postdoctoral project

The main goals of creating post-doctoral studies include developing the quality of research and teaching staff and establishing a balance between the professional and age composition of the staff. At the beginning of the project, based on open source materials, an analysis of postdoctoral systems in Russian and foreign universities and of the mechanisms for the external recruitment of young scientists was carried out. Similarities and differences in these systems were determined and best practices were identified. The most effective systems which were possible to transfer to SPbPU, include the postdoctoral system introduced at St. Petersburg State University, which was implemented as a grant competition for research conducted under the guidance of leading university scientists.

In 2014, draft regulations for postdoctoral studies were developed. The recruitment of postdocs to SPbPU was