

Leading Universities in Russia: From teaChing to Research Excellence

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For the Russian higher education system, the last decade has been not only a time of far-reaching major reforms (such as the introduction of a new university admissions system based on national unified test examination (USE) obligatory for all high school graduates), but also one pertaining to the realization of several government excellence initiatives aimed at supporting and developing leading Russian universities. In fact, these government programs influenced the higher education landscape of the country a great deal. For, while they did not help much with solving the problem of a preponderance of weak higher education institutions in the sector, they certainly allowed a fair number of rather good and promising universities to improve significantly the quality of their educational programs and to some extent, their research capacity. Three main programs have been launched in the last eight years: innovative educational projects, development and support for national research universities, and most recently, the program for improving global competitiveness, all of which have been underpinned by the same basic principles, which has resulted in common inefficiencies. All three programs were initiated by the state and were run under the assumption that there would be little, if any, input from the business sector, both in terms of financial resources or direct participation through links between the academic sector and industry.

Innovative Educational Projects

In early 2006, the Ministry for Education announced two rounds of competition for the Innovative Educational Projects. The main

purpose of this program was to give selected universities incentives and resources to develop high-quality educational programs (and significantly improve existing ones) both at undergraduate and graduate level. Creating Master's level programs was an outstanding challenge for many universities and this project was aimed at helping them to build sound master program curricula under the new institutional rules (Russia joined the Bologna process in 2003). Since it was clear that the universities lacked people with advanced training in many disciplines (e.g. social sciences), important emphasis was placed on providing investment in human capital through various forms of training activities and advanced courses for faculty members.

Each university submitted an application with detailed description of the proposed activities and expected results. In the first round, the ministry received 200 applications from which 17 winners were selected by an executive committee that included government officials as well as researchers and people from Russian business community. The successful bidders were awarded financial support to the tune of 20 billion Rub (660 million USD) for two years in total. In the second round (organized half a year later), there were 40 winners from 267 applications, who also received support of 20 billion Rub, about one third of those chosen being located in Moscow. In sum, the aim of this program was to focus on the educational sphere as a stepping-stone to improving teaching and research, but it did not set any ambitious goals relating to the latter. That is, state money was to be distributed for the following activities: training of faculty and

researchers, acquisition of research equipment, and development of innovative educational programs. To assure that money would not be just “eaten up” by the universities in their general budgets, they were prohibited from spending money on faculty staff salaries.

It is hard to identify the general impact of this initiative on these universities and on the Russian higher education system in general, because no rigorous analysis was carried out by the end of the program. Until the very last moment participating universities believed (and that belief has been based on some unofficial information coming from the Ministry of Education) that this program would be extended for at least several years more. However, it has been terminated without any prolongation and many universities had to stop abruptly the development programs that they had started, since the short-term financial support did not bring (with rare exceptions) secure financial sustainability for launched projects. The only objective fact that sheds some light on the program impact is that 25 out of the 29 universities that were awarded the status of national research university were recipients of innovative educational project.

National Research Universities Program

The aim of the next strategic government program was to contribute to the dynamic development of research and technology in Russia by providing program-based financial support to a number of leading universities. These universities were awarded with the status of national research university and were supposed to improve significantly in terms of the quality of their human capital and infrastructure as well as increase their impact and visibility in the academic market. The first two NRUs were created by a decree of president Medvedev in October 2008, namely, the National Research Nuclear University and Moscow Engineering and Physics University. However, the majority of universities were

selected for this status on a competitive basis, with the selection process being organized in two rounds that resulted in 27 winners in total (with 12 universities being awarded this status in 2009 and 15 in 2010), with the additional to aforementioned institutions.

They submitted their proposals in the form of five year development programs and in accordance with the requirements of the structure and content, each had six main sections: (1) a list and brief description of university priority areas in science and education (justified by the objective results of educational, research and innovative activities for the past three years); (2) program goals and objectives; (3) a detailed list of planned activities; (4) justification for funding; (5) the governance model; and (6) description of the expected socioeconomic results of program implementation for the science, education and economy of the country. An important part of each program was a university commitment to some key indicators of program progress and success. The funding mechanism takes the form of direct subsidies transferred in tranches, delivering of each successive one being subject to the results of previous reporting. The program terms and conditions strictly determine how money can be spent and again, and no funds can be distributed directly for salaries (neither for teachers nor for researchers).

An important feature of the program is that it is formally designed to support research and education not across the whole university, but just in the priority areas. This creates at least two sorts of inefficiency: first, some universities have put a lot effort into justifying spending program resources to other areas at the expense of the designated ones and to their detriment have occasionally succeeded. Second, it doesn't require performance indicators to be calculated in clear and transparent way and thus has given the universities the opportunity to “play with numbers”. This is not the only

problem associated with the design of the key indicators, which are supposed to measure success in education activity, research performance, international recognition, and financial sustainability. Many experts have expressed various concerns about them, such as their being hard to very verify (e.g. the numbers of students that start their career in the focal subject areas). Moreover, because the directives of the indicators say nothing precise about the academic progress of an institution, the program has become associated with improper incentives that lower quality. Finally, some indicators simply do not work effectively due to the lack of clarity in relation to expected academic standards (e.g. some indicators do not make a distinction between international peer-review journals and domestic ones when estimating total research productivity of an institution).

Even though the program of support for national research universities, obviously, has had some limitations, it has had an important impact on the higher education sector landscape in Russia. However, there is still little integration of teaching and research within this program, and some disciplines are favored over others. That is, there is some bias toward technical institutions: 29 universities in total received NRU status in 2009-2010, including 17 technical universities (59%), 9 classical universities (31%), 1 social science university, 1 medical school, and one academic center under the Russian Academy of Science. Moreover, eleven of the selected universities are based in Moscow.

International Competitiveness Program

At the end of year 2012, the Russian president Vladimir Putin signed a decree with a target that at least five Russian universities by 2020 should be in the top 100 of world university rankings. While such a target seems probably too ambitious, it clearly indicates the priorities articulated by the state and such

values are also clear (at least to some extent) to the professoriate. Regarding this, according to the recent survey of the academic profession almost 90% of Russian faculty in public universities believes that strengthening the nation's capacity to compete internationally should be among the top priorities for higher education in the country.

In the mid-June this year, about 50 universities submitted their application for the global competitiveness program and the successful candidates will be selected after evaluation by international and Russian experts. Until now, there has been no information as to how many universities will be chosen. However, the total financial support is already determined for the year 2013, being approximately 9 billion Rub (300 million USD) and this money will be distributed disproportionately, according to the quality of applications and commitments that universities are ready to take. As for the future years, there is still no decision about the amount of financial support that will be made available. The rectors of universities chosen for support within this program will be personally responsible for the program implementation and results. Also, they are about to lose their unlimited power, for each university have an external board that will power over the rector regarding the most important decisions. This board will also include international colleagues so as to introduce worldly experience and vision into the system.

Selection is based on university commitment to ambitious goals that university is targeting to achieve within several consequent years: position (accurately up to 50 positions) in leading global universities rankings (for universities and educational programs); the number of articles in the Web of Science and Scopus per faculty member; the average citation index per faculty member calculated from the total number of articles in the Web of Science and Scopus; proportion of international faculty; the proportion of international students studying on the

university's main educational programs; the share of revenue from non-budgetary sources in relation to total university revenue; average USE scores of students admitted to the university for a full-time bachelor's degree and specialist studies financed by the federal government.

Some experts have expressed concerns that the design of the indicator set creates incentives for quick results, that is, publishing into low-tier journals to achieve quantitative targets and bringing in weak international "academic tourists". It has also been argued that the criteria discriminate against humanities in that journals are not the main places to publish scholarly work. In sum, there is some mismatch between the targeted goals of this program and the national priority of creating competitive universities in Russia not only in a limited numbers of disciplines (such as technical sciences) but across the whole spectrum. While it's too early to discuss any possible results of this program, one can see that internationalization and research support are now the key projected milestones that were largely ignored under the previous initiatives. Whether those universities, with an almost-zero level of internationalization and historically-rooted separation from basic research, will be able to succeed, is still an open question.

Conclusion

The three programs described above aimed at achieving excellence have some features in common. In all cases the choice of the recipients for funding has been based on competitive grounds that assume the integral development of programs and some clear commitment from the university to achieve their set targets. However, within each initiative there was no long-term commitment for financial support from the state, which clearly created obstacles for long-term investment in relation to such matters as human capital (including hiring international faculty for tenure and tenure-track positions) and the unintended incentive of obtaining quick returns on short-term goals. There is also a lack of general vision of what universities should be striving to achieve as this is buried in tens of performance indicators and extensive paper reporting. As a consequence, there is a little understanding of what the exact overall impact the realization of these programs by the chosen institutions should have on the higher education system in general. Nevertheless, improvement of quality of leading Russian universities is evidently apparent and this is clearly as a consequence of the state policy of continuous support in recent years.