

Russia

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Russia's Ivy League

The Russian government wants to have its own world-class universities. But first it must introduce the concept of differentiation to Russian higher education, and make clear that not all universities are quite equal. This point might seem self-evident to a U.S. reader, but in Russia—as in many European countries—the egalitarian tradition is deeply rooted.

So it was a real shocker for many to hear Andrei Fursenko, the minister of education and science, arguing for a “Premier League” among universities as well as soccer clubs.

Following the example set, most notably, by China, but also other countries, from Germany to Pakistan, the government is implementing an ambitious program of upgrading a group of hand-picked universities. More than two dozen winners of recent competitions are receiving funding and rights to design their own curricula. In return, these flagship institutions are expected to improve their governance, attract younger scholars, retrain their faculty and, ultimately, produce better research and become more visible in the global academic industry.

Indeed, such differentiation is badly needed. Paradoxically, one of the problems that plagued Russian higher education in the post-Soviet years was very low competition. To begin with, there is not much academic mobility in Russia: Although some of the best students from every region do apply every year to the top schools in Moscow and Saint Petersburg, local universities continue to enjoy captive markets in their home regions. A huge surge in demand for higher education surprised post-Soviet Russia, with the student population growing more than twofold. Nearly all of this growth was driven by fee-paying students (as opposed to those applicants theoretically, the best ones whose education is paid for by the state).

Many of these applicants were interested in higher education primarily as a means of avoiding the army draft. Others were the first in their family to attend college and could not assess the quality of education they were buying. This created obvious incentives for universities to accept as many applicants as their classrooms could seat, compromising the quality of their teaching and abandoning any attempts to do any research. Many of the Russian state universities and private institutions de-facto converted themselves into diploma mills.

An extreme devaluation of some Russian university degrees was the result.

This situation is set to change. Some degree of competition will be introduced, unavoidably, by the market itself. Due to the demographic slump, the pool of potential applicants in three years will be, at best, half the size of what it was two years ago. This, one hopes, would finally force universities to compete for undergraduates and improve the quality of their programs. The introduction of the Unified State Examinations, an SAT-like national text, will also boost competition by making the quality of students accepted by different universities more easily comparable (See Education Reform, page 3).

The flagship universities program is also designed to foster competition in the industry. The title of

“national research” and “federal” universities will, it is hoped, provide a clear marker of quality, forcing other universities to shape up, or lose their best applicants. The flagship universities program established the principle that universities have to compete for additional funding. The program sends a clear signal that the university will be judged against very clear, measurable international benchmarks again, something that has been until recently an anathema for the Russian educational community, accustomed to falling back on vague talk about the “unique national model of education” to dismiss any calls for comparisons with universities abroad.

Instead, the “national research universities” are now being assessed on such criteria as the number of articles published in international peer-review journals and their impact factor; number of international students, attracted by the institution; or the number of young PhDs hired on the global academic job market.

Naturally, the challenges are huge. To begin with, few members of the Russian academic community know firsthand what a top-level global university is. Our analysis of rectors shows that only one of the leaders of these flagship institutions has any experience of study or work at a university abroad. Indeed, 22 out of 24 rectors surveyed by us graduated from the same universities they are now leading, and only 10 have any experience at all outside their alma mater. The vast majority came to their current campuses as freshmen and never ever left. This leads to patently unrealistic plans, including promises to catch up with Stanford in 15 years, or to increase the number of articles published in top-level journals three-fold in three years. The program itself has also attracted criticism, much of it justified, for excessive bureaucratic regulation.

Still, it is quite likely that the landscape of Russian higher education is bound to change. Some universities, hopefully, will turn themselves around and join the global league tables, where Russia is currently represented by two universities. Others will find themselves relegated to the role of baccalaureate-only institutions or even community colleges. Most importantly, one hopes it will be much easier for new generations of Russian high-school graduates to tell which university degrees are worth investing their money and time in, and which are not.

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