

Russian Academic Excellence—A Long Struggle

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In 2013, the Russian government established the Russian Academic Excellence Project, generally referred to as the “5–100 Project” because one of the aims of the enterprise was to catapult five Russian universities into the top 100 of the global university rankings. The primary goals, however, were to transform several top Russian universities into globally competitive research universities and to encourage internationalization. While the program, which is now completing its work, failed to achieve the desired rankings, much else was accomplished. Twenty-one Russian universities were selected from a larger group of applicants by an international council, and USD 2.3 billion was invested in these institutions over seven years, averaging around 9 percent of the annual university budgets. The government is now discussing a new initiative to further improve Russian universities. It is worth examining some of the successes—and failures—of 5–100.

The Russian Context

Russia’s higher education system is large and varied, with a complex and troubled past preceding new, contemporary challenges. There are 4 million students in Russia’s 724 universities—one of the world’s largest academic systems—with 73 percent of high school graduates continuing on to higher education. While many of the top universities are concentrated in Moscow and St. Petersburg, excellent universities are also scattered across the country’s vast hinterland. Russia’s complex history continues to haunt current reality. During the Soviet period, higher education was harnessed for the needs of the state, with no autonomy and ideologically subservient to the Communist Party. Most of the traditional multidisciplinary universities were divided into smaller, focused institutions serving specific industries and ministries. Universities focused almost exclusively on teaching while research was conducted separately at institutes managed by the Soviet Academy of Science, largely ending a tradition that combined teaching and research at universities. (There were some exceptions: Several universities founded during the Cold War were research intensive.) Higher education was closely linked to the economic planning apparatus. Unsurprisingly, the entire academic and scientific system became highly bureaucratic. Further, academic links to the rest of the world were few—Soviet academe functioned in its own isolated universe. Despite the severe restrictions, several universities and research institutes, especially in such fields as physics and mathematics, were world-class, and the system, however flawed, had considerable influence in the larger, global Soviet sphere of influence. Further, there was significant accomplishment in fields related to the technical and military spheres.

When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, politics and the economy entered into a decade of severe instability. Universities and research institutes lost most of their government funding, and with few exceptions, standards collapsed and infrastructure deteriorated. For the first time in 70 years, academics and students had contact with the rest of the world and many chose to leave, never to return. Corruption, always a part of the Soviet system, flourished, as institutions and academics sought to survive in the context of economic constraint and political uncertainty.

Elements of the Soviet system continue to weigh heavily on Russian higher education and science, including high levels of bureaucracy and the bifurcation of teaching and research—despite significant efforts and some success at reforms.

Abstract

The Russian excellence project, referred to as the 5–100 program, is coming to an end. While it did not accomplish one of its goals to catapult some Russian universities into the top 100 of the global university rankings, the project achieved a number of important objectives. These include internationalization, improved management, and strengthened research infrastructure and productivity. The Russian government is currently considering a new program for university improvement.

The accomplishments of the 5–100 program have been significant, especially considering the challenge of improving universities anywhere, and particularly in the Russian context.

An Awakening—Of Sorts

By 2000, the Russian government and society recognized that academe and research were in crisis—at the same time that a modicum of stability was restored in society and oil revenues and the revival of industry provided renewed resources. Corruption was to an extent reined in. For example, an out of control corrupt student admission system was replaced by the Unified State Examination system in 2009 and it has worked well. Some Russian Academy of Sciences (RAS) institutes were renting out space to private companies, a questionable and perhaps illegal practice, and this was ended. Problems continue, however. Recent reports of senior provincial politicians purchasing doctoral dissertations are an example.

Budgets for universities and the RAS were significantly, although still inadequately, improved. Greater importance has been given to research. Based on national competitions, 29 of the best universities were upgraded to “national research universities” and provided with additional funding. The government has provided support for international labs in Russian universities headed by prominent global researchers who spend time in Russia. Some prominent Russian academics who had emigrated have returned as lab heads. Guidance to modernize academic management was provided and faculty salaries, which had dramatically deteriorated after 1991, were increased, although still inadequate by international standards. As a result of all of these changes, academic productivity increased.

The 5–100 Initiative and Higher Education Reform

The accomplishments of the 5–100 program have been significant, especially considering the challenge of improving universities anywhere, and particularly in the Russian context. Perhaps most important, 5–100 signified that creating world-class research-oriented universities in Russia is a key national goal. The funds allocated, while by no means transformative, were significant. Funds were allocated on the basis of specific academic plans and performance was carefully monitored—the universities were forced to think strategically and were then evaluated. Universities were required to spend their 5–100 funds on specific development projects. Over time, a history of academic planning with vague and unrealistic goals was replaced by more realistic and practical goal setting. As the program developed, the most successful universities received additional funding, while some others got less. Seminars for university leaders and others aimed at improving management, enhancing internationalization, and generating new ideas were organized. Senior management and other key academic personnel from the participating universities met to discuss common problems, and an atmosphere of friendly competition developed.

Recent studies document that productivity increased both at 5–100 universities and at other universities as well—the investment is paying off in terms of more and better research, the fulfillment of strategic goals, and the modernization of university leadership. Other Russian universities that seek to improve their prestige and develop a research profile are benchmarking against the 5–100 institutions.

Limited but Notable Accomplishments

The 5–100 program was limited to 21 universities deemed to have the best potential for development into internationally competitive research universities. According to objective measures, all have made some progress, but results for at least a third of the group have been modest. A few have tried to “game the system” rather than produce measurable results. The top universities, however, have moved rapidly to join the ranks of key research universities worldwide. While a few of the universities have constructively involved Russian Academy of Sciences institutes, by and large the RAS has not been affected by reform and remains locked in the Soviet past.

Although none of the 5–100 universities have joined the upper reaches of the global rankings—too much emphasis was placed on these rankings and their metrics anyway—some improvements were made and several of the 5–100 institutions have done well in some of the subject matter rankings. Russia will need to pay serious attention to the rest of its sprawling higher education system, much of which remains of rather low quality. In this respect Russia is similar to most other emerging economies. Top

research universities are of course important, but they are a small part of a complex higher education system further complicated by the challenges of a huge country geographically, with weak institutions in many provincial areas. It is important to keep in mind that Russian universities have only rejoined the global higher education space in the past few decades, and even now international links and collaboration remain limited. This is a requirement for any hope that Russia has of building world-class universities.

What is clear is that Russia is one of the world's main higher education systems, with a huge reservoir of top talent. If Russia wants to join the community of top universities, succeed in making significant research contributions, and educate people for a sophisticated economy, it needs world-class research universities. The 5-100 program has been a good start in that direction. Now, with planning for an additional initiative under way, and with careful thinking and appropriate resources, Russia may be able to achieve the next step toward its ambitious goals. ▲

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