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Efficiency of Russian education through the scale of World University Rankings

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Abstract

In the article the authors conduct the analysis of capacities for Russian universities to meet the requirements claimed by the Russian Ministry of Education which sets the aim to reach the first 100 lines of World University Rankings. In the stepwise manner the authors describe ranking criteria, particularly QS, and tailor them to the Russian system of education evaluating at the same time universities' capacities to achieve these criteria in the timeframe of the following 7 years. In its turn, proposed some initiatives to bridge the "gaps" that are mostly connected with increasing academic mobility among students and professors and integrating scientific input to educational programs. As a conclusion the authors promote the idea that modernization of higher education in Russia should take into account the requirements of the ranking systems but with the aim at perceiving them as challenges to improve the system as a whole, keeping national values and traditions.

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1. Introduction

World university rankings represent not only a tool to measure university success but can be considered as a new challenge to all universities worldwide. Russia could not stand apart from these "world educational Olympics" but discrepancy between self-evaluation and evaluation by the world ranking criteria generated hot disputes among university communities. The roots of these disputes should be found in history when Russia was convinced that its education was the best in the world. The picture presented by the annual ranking reports breaks this illusion. Therefore in 2013, the Russian Ministry of Education and Science announced a revolutionary project, entitled "5–100" contest that implies the state support to the leading Russian universities, thoroughly selected. The total number

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of universities pretending to take these privileges was initially 56; after the first round their number decreased up to 36 and finally on the board, there were left only 15.

The project goal is that no less than 5 Russian universities are to enter the TOP-100 of the world university rankings by 2020. In the framework of this paper we consider ranking systems as the main instrument for measuring the quality of education and university success and try to answer the questions what chances Russian universities have to be in the first lines of ranking tables and what time, what resources they will have to take. First, we propose to start with the history of the ranking phenomenon.

2. Historical background

Initially, rankings were designed as a way to compare universities. However, in recent years, rankings are becoming more significant elements in the academic community that influence the development of international understanding of the quality of education, scientific activity and university functioning with regard to the world leaders (Baidenko, 2010). Nowadays, there are three most famous academic rankings, they are:

- 1) Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU), Shanghai Ranking (published since 2003);
- 2) QS World University Rankings, QS ranking (published since 2000);
- 3) Times Higher Education World University Ranking — Thomson Reuters (THE), Times ranking (published since 2010) (2014).

The goals of rankings are: a) evaluation of higher education at all levels (education, science, administration, financing, and infrastructure); b) providing consumers with reliable information about educational services.

Most of the Russian universities are aimed at the QS ranking. The principal QS criteria are:

- academic reputation (40%);
- number of foreign specialists (5%);
- employers' evaluation of qualitative training of graduates (10%);
- number of international students who study within educational programs of academic mobility (5%);
- proportion of faculty members to the number of students (20%);
- citation index (20%) (Tardina, 2012).

It should be noted that ranking is always a relative system; it is not designed according to any absolute indicators. Every time, the best indicator of the evaluation year is taken as maximum, and the remaining system is built up in accordance with that indicator. We can conclude that every year only fewer changes occur in the top of the ranking tables, thus no more than 6-7 new universities enter the TOP-100.

Also, it would be fair to say that in the past years the positions of these universities fell within the range of the first 20 universities, following the TOP-100. Consequently, the universities with high ambitions to reach this level need to do something extraordinary, otherwise their chances are going to nil. As Alice from L. Carroll novel would say, "here we must run as fast as we can, just to stay in place. And if you wish to go anywhere you must run twice as fast as that" (Carroll, 2009).

3. QS ranking criteria

The most significant QS ranking criterion is academic reputation that is based on the opinions of educational experts relating to the quality and efficiency of educational trainings provided by this or that university. But in order to attract a great amount of experts who will vote in favour of Russian universities, universities have to earn a high reputation at the world labour and educational markets.

At the point where we are now, the perspectives to do it are very low. We see some reasons for it: 1) low internationalization that is conditioned by the fact that Russian universities are not ready to implement educational programs in a foreign language; 2) low level of international relations among researchers that is conditioned by historical isolation coming from the Soviet times in connection with a weak financial component regarding to academic mobility. As an indirect reason it is a low percent of experts from Russia, who are currently only 1.4%, which means that, in the end, the chances of Russian universities can be no more than 2-3% of votes out of the total (2014).

Another QS criterion is the number of foreign specialists. No sense to hide the fact that high bureaucratization, low internationalization, and weak international activity makes it difficult to complete. A foreign professor has to be working at a Russian university for no less than three months per year. It is not easy to achieve it, considering the fact that leading foreign scientists are not registered at unemployment agencies, waiting for a favourable offer from Russia. Taking into account an unstable geopolitical situation in Russia, hopes for it are melting as first snow. Professors need guarantees like financial benefits, safety and security but Russian universities still can not provide them at full extent.

The next criterion is employer's opinion. As a rule, this criterion is based on perception of the training quality of graduates and graduates' ranking on the labour market. For instance, if a university provides high-quality specialists to the labour market, they immediately become in high demand by large national and foreign companies. The basic reason for why it is difficult to comply with the criterion in Russia can be referred to low incentives and involvement of employers to take part in university trainings. It is well known that leading European universities develop and implement educational programs in close connection with industrial companies. In Russia these mechanisms are not adjusted, and if they exist, they work as a mere formality. Therefore, Russian employers do not consider university reputation as contribution to their business development. They are simply not interested in it.

The next criterion is the number of international students who study at Russian universities. According to statistics, the proportion of foreign full-time students currently studying at Russian universities on a compensation basis is not high: in 2011-2012, around 125 000 students from neighboring and distant foreign countries studied in Russia. Of them, "real" foreigners, i.e. citizens from distant foreign countries, are a bit more than a half – 51%, from the countries of the Commonwealth of Independent States – 47%, from the Baltic countries – 1% (Krasnova, 2014).

What are the reasons for so low indicator? The three most obvious reasons are: 1) geographic location, 2) insecure living, and 3) language of teaching. If we take universities of Western Siberia and Ural, then the questions about climate conditions and available comfortable transportation lines arise. These two factors together do not help to attract foreign students to Russian universities. Taking into account that Russian scientific schools are not well known internationally, reputation of educational service has not been established yet, then, there is nothing to say about foreign students to be attracted to Russian universities. As for insecure living, it does not depend much on universities themselves.

A lot is determined by the political and economic situation in the country and the influence of mass media abroad which are able to create both positive and tense atmosphere. As an example, let us take situations that generate diplomatic claim on the part of EU and USA to Russia, such as: ban on gay propaganda, ban on adoption of Russian children by foreigners, and the Ukraine crisis.

The next criterion is a citation index that directly depends on the frequency of researcher publications that are registered in the world databases such as Web of Science and Scopus. A proportion of Russian and English journals available in these databases is 1 to 46. According to the latest statistic data, citation index of Russian scientists is only 1% (Titova, 2008).

The problems for Russian academicians might be in 1) language barrier because publications to be accepted should be only in English; 2) low recognition of Russian science and its representatives abroad.

And even though, the first problem can be solved with the help of translators but we can not speed up the time. The procedure of getting a citation index is very time consuming. First, the paper is translated, and then it is reviewed, and then published. After publication it should take up to six months before the paper reaches like-minded people who are supposed to ensure citation index to the author. Under the most optimistic projection, the entire process takes no less than one or even two years. Taking it into account we can not rely on the quick success.

4. Bridging the gaps

As was shown above the perspectives for the Russian universities have the prolonging basis. We are only at the beginning of the way leading us to the TOP of the mountain. Criteria to measure university efficiency in the global sense are not eligible to the current system of education in Russia. To achieve these criteria, many things should be changed or adjusted. What particular can we do? First, we have to look for added incentives in order to form mutually beneficial relations between a university and production, developing unique programs that allow a university to train exclusively competent specialists, who are ready to make bold decisions and perform unusual tasks. For this purpose,

it is required to have integrated science and practice programs, top-ranked instructors experienced in production industry, well-developed facilities. It is realistic to do all the above, but it should be recognized that it will take much longer than 7 years.

Second, we have to strengthen international interaction and collaboration, enlarging the border of scientific knowledge in different subject fields. In other words, academic mobility that can be expressed in internships, conferences, symposiums and co-projects is able to play the crucial role for reaching such criteria as academic reputation, number of foreign specialists, international students, and, finally, the citation index.

If we add to this list – reinforcement of personal professional contacts, improvement of linguistic competence, launching a variety of grant programmes to support students and young PhD candidates, as well as scholarships for talented students, development succession of generations, we have all chances to take higher positions and what is more important to deliver better education, with the perspective to be the best in the world.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion we would like to emphasize that for Russia to enter international education standards and to gain a high academic reputation, it is required to step outside the institutional education itself, thus providing the ground for reflection over it (Baidenko, 2010). Nowadays, there is no need to focus on local internal transformation related exclusively to the development of material and human resources. Transformation should take place on a global level. It will allow accepting challenges as incentives for transformation focused on reforming the system but not on its destruction.

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