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Formation of Leading Universities: the Russian Approach

At the government level, an objective was set to secure a place for a few Russian universities in the world's best top list by 2020 by means of increasing considerably their budget financing. International experience points to importance of a combination of a few key factors for a university to be a leading one with the factor of funding being only one of them. The Russian approach should be adjusted towards expansion of the number of measures and go beyond the limits of quantitative and financial parameters alone in measuring achievement of that goal.

In May 2012, at the expanded meeting of the State Council President Dmitry Medvedev expressed an opinion that at least five Russian institutions of higher education (IHE) should secure a place in the top hundred of the main world ratings. By the end of the year, the reformed Ministry of Education and Science of the Russian Federation announced its plans to support 10 to 15 IHE which would be granted substantial budget subsidies for that purpose. As of 2013, Rb 9bn was reserved for development of that elite group of universities, while in 2014 and 2015 -- \$21bn and \$24bn,¹ respectively.

So, the main principles on which cultivation of leading research (they may be also called innovation and entrepreneurial as plenty of such fashionable terms have been coined recently) universities is based are the following: selection on a tender basis of 10 to 15 IHE, rendering of substantial budget support to such IHE and, by all appearances, concentration of efforts on meeting of a number of parameters which are included in the assessment criteria in preparation of international ratings. At present, the worst results of domestic IHE are related to their research activities, that is, the number and specific characteristics of publications, the quoting rate of such publications and the share of highly quoted papers which are indexed in global data bases. The above indices are expected to be raised by means of financial incentives.

Publication activities indices are, indeed, attached great importance to – they account for one-third of the total number of the main indices of achievement of the goals of the *Development of Science and Technology* State Program² approved late in December 2012. The above program provides for growth in the unit weight of “institutions of higher vocational training in domestic expenditures on research and development to 15% by 2020”.

The campaign to build up quantitative indices has already started: the number of IHE where lecturers are now paid extra funds for publications in journals and publications indexed in Web of science and Scopus global data bases, as well as in journals from the BAK list has increased. Will higher funding and better quantitative indices of publication activities permit Russian universities to become the world's leading ones?

¹ P.Panov. IHE will be granted Rb 55bn for securing a place in the world elite. 06.12.2012. <http://izvestia.ru/news/540974>

² Resolution No. 2433-r of December 20, 2012 of the Government of the Russian Federation.

If the international experience – as the established and thoroughly analyzed one – and recent debates are referred to, it becomes apparent that financial incentives are only one factor which is important for becoming the leader. A university becomes a leading one if a combination of the minimum three parameters is achieved³:

- ☒ Concentration of high-skilled personnel and gifted students;
- ☒ Sufficient funds which create favorable conditions for training and research;
- ☒ Effective management incorporating a strategic vision and flexibility.

So, financial indices alone are an important factor, but insufficient one. It is to be noted that though the quality of personnel can be ensured, including by means of a high pay, however, that factor is not a determining one. Research points to the fact that the high level of training and research strongly correlates with such index as mobility. So, on the basis of the data on European universities it was shown that there is a direct correlation between the policy of hiring, selection of lecturers and R&D outputs⁴.

In particular, low domestic mobility creates an enclosed academic space and a university that enrolls mainly its own students in a master course and hires lecturers from among those who graduated from it will never become the world's leading one. Universities with a high degree of endogamy (that is, there is a large number of graduates of that university among lecturers) have the lowest R&D ratings. It is to be noted that high endogamy is the specifics of Russian IHE, including elite and status universities.

In its turn, effective management means that universities should have an autonomy which permits them to reduce red-tape barriers in decision-making and leadership, including successful experience of university managers in research work and engagement of managers of private companies in the work of universities' boards of trustees and boards. The private sector's contribution may consist in development of relevant training programs and plans, as well as applied research lines and projects. Finally, management will never be effective without academic freedom. It is for that reason Chinese universities fail to be among the leaders. At those universities, "lecturers and students can only to a limited extent call in question the state policy or participate in discussions of important issues. But such limitations hinder creative thinking"⁵.

If the most up-to-date processes which both take place in the world's leading universities and have an effect on the state of such universities are referred to, it can be concluded that the HR policy and management are becoming ever more flexible. So, in 2012 the US National Research Council drew the government's attention to the fact that the leading positions of US universities needed to be strengthened as problems related to effective management were getting bigger and bigger. The above problems included the following: limited opportunities for young researchers to make an academic career, such complex regulatory norms introduced by the state as create an additional burden on universities and reduce efficiency of their work, as well as

³ J.Salmi. *Challenges of Establishing World Class Universities* / Jamil Salmi, translated from English – M.: Ves Mir Publishing House, 2009, p.7.

⁴ J.Salmi. *Challenges of Establishing World Class Universities* / Jamil Salmi, translated from English – M.: Ves Mir Publishing House, 2009, p.21.

⁵ J.Salmi. *Challenges of Establishing World Class Universities* / Jamil Salmi, translated from English – M.: Ves Mir Publishing House, 2009, p.63.

growing competition to win over the best foreign students and researchers⁶. The proposed solutions include the following: provision of higher autonomy to state research universities, easing of the formalities for inviting foreign researchers and enrolling the best students from abroad by means of optimization of visa-issuing procedures and strengthening of the role of business. Specifically, business is no longer regarded only as the buyer of intellectual property and graduates. The focus is shifted more and more towards development of post-graduate programs in the interests of science-intensive sectors and promotion of utility of science and its contribution to development of the community in general.

Similar processes take place at UK higher education institutions: the assessment criteria now include the index of “a contribution” and the index of “an impact” of the research in terms of the social utility⁷. So far, it is a widely debated topic as it is rather difficult to assess the contribution of research to economic, social and political development.

Finally, motivation of mobility and the proposed forms of hiring is getting more flexible. The practice of “life-long” tenures is becoming more and more controversial, new options of employment are being developed and various conditions of and ratios between training work and research work are offered and change in place of work for the period of from six months to a couple of years is encouraged as it is believed to be important for a lecturer or researcher to obtain new knowledge and skills and establish new professional contacts. Motivation of professors is changing, as well. The perception that a high pay can attract leading researchers does not work. Such factors as freedom of traveling, opportunities to maintain and develop scientific contacts, the minimum of bureaucratic formalities which accompany the research and availability of the state-of-the art technologies and chemical agents are getting more and more important. If not the last in that list, the factor of a pay is, certainly, not on the top.

In this context, the very first and, in a sense, simple steps are being made in the Russian policy aimed at promotion of Russian IHE to the range of leading research universities. However, at the initial stages it would be important to care about utilization of more subtle motivation instruments and introduce those which suit better the existing conditions. In particular, it concerns motivation of mobility, including that between IHE, reduction of the number of bureaucratic procedures at least at the IHE level and creation of the new basis of networking with industry. If promotion of such measures succeeds, they may be followed one day by development of academic freedoms, but that process is related to a greater extent to a change in mentality.

⁶ Research Universities and the Future of America. Ten Breakthrough Actions Vital to our Nation’s Prosperity and Security. National Research Council, the National Academies Press, 2012.

⁷ <http://www.ref.ac.uk/>