

Failure to Make the Grade in Ranking Riles Universities

By [Alexandra Odynova](#)

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A portrait of 18th-century polymath Mikhail Lomonosov gazing down upon students, faculty and visitors to Moscow State University, which bears his name. **Vladimir Filonov**

Russian universities are seething after failing to win international recognition in a year when the country has been galvanized by Kremlin calls for modernization. So angry are they that some are calling for the creation of Russia's own university ranking system.

Some might say the problem boils down to a "Squirrel Institute" mentality — an arrogance by scholars that causes them to refuse to learn English or publish their research in English. As a result, their work often escapes the attention of the international academic community, and Russian universities suffer.

Not a single Russian university made it to the top 200 list of the world's best schools released this fall by the Times Higher Education World University Rankings, the most authoritative global annual rating of higher education institutions.

The top-ranked school is Harvard University, while many other U.S. and British universities prevail on the list.

"Russia has a proud history of scientific innovation and has some excellent universities," Phil Baty, an editor of the [ranking](#), said by e-mail. "But the university system as a whole has suffered in recent years — losing leading research talent to other countries, and suffering from lower investment than other nations."

Last year, Moscow State University placed 155th, while St. Petersburg State University came in at 168th.

Dismayed with Moscow State University's lackluster ranking, its rector, Viktor Sadovnichy, said Russia needed to create its own ranking because international ratings are not objective concerning Russian schools.

The idea was explicitly [backed](#) by Prime Minister Vladimir Putin at a meeting with Russian rectors last month.

Moscow State University has worked hard to cooperate with international employers and academic communities to improve its ranking — and it has worked, but not as much as it hoped, said Alexei Chaplygin, an analyst with the Moscow-based ReitOR rating agency.

"To establish relations with a ranking agency is a common practice for universities in civilized countries," Chaplygin said.

He said Moscow State University and a number other leading schools tried to get into the Times Higher Education World University Rankings but failed because of the "bad quality" of provided data.

Baty said his organization was working with Moscow State University "to re-examine its data after it failed to make the top 200 this year."

"Russia's research publication output is relatively low," Baty said.

The ranking is based on 13 elements, including research income, ratio of international and domestic staff, income from industry, teaching, and citation impact. The ranking's editors used data provided by Thomson Reuters to make their conclusions for the first time this year.

Russia's limited volume of research publications indexed by Thomson Reuters, as well as those publications' limited influence as measured by citations, is reflected in the rankings, which employ both publication volume and citation counts among the 13 separate performance indicators. Also, the system of measuring was changed this year so traditional prestige no longer holds much weight in the final reckoning.

"All these factors will make it difficult for Russia to be recognized among the top 200," Baty said.

One of the measurements that Russian scholars frequently fail to fit is the citation index because many of their articles are written in Russian and remain unknown for the majority of the global scientific community. But even the country's top scholars don't encourage English.

When asked about Russia's low citation index, Russian Academy of Sciences president Yury Osipov said in an [interview](#) with Gazeta.ru that Russian scholars don't have to learn English because if “one is a high-level specialist, he will study Russian and read articles in Russian.”

The Russian Academy of Sciences echoed the statement of its president on its web site — and published an English version of its web site that has been mocked by bloggers for stunning translation errors. In one mistake, the renowned Institute for Protein Research was mistakenly named “Squirrel Institute” because the Russian word for protein, “belok,” was incorrectly translated as “belka,” a squirrel.

Times Higher Education World University Rankings used to obtain data from QS, a leading global career and education network, but Times Higher Education broke the contract after the joint 2009 ranking prompted criticism from schools in several countries, including Russia.

QS releases its own university rating every year, and this year's list included one Russian school — Moscow State University — at 93rd place, an improvement from last year, when it ranked 101st.

The QS rating is based on measures of research quality, graduate employability, teaching and the number of foreign students and teachers, its [web site](#) says.

Another top world rating, the Shanghai-based 2010 Academic Ranking of World Universities, released in August, ranked Moscow State University at 74th, the only Russian school that entered the top 100. That ranking is mainly based on the number of published scientific articles and per capita performance, its [web site](#) says.

Sergei Guriev, rector of the New Economic School in Moscow and a Morgan Stanley professor of economics, said Russian universities “have been losing ground not only to their OECD counterparts but also to the universities from developing countries.” For example, China has six universities in the 200 institutions ranked by the Times Higher Education World University Rankings.

“Modernization and a knowledge-based economy by definition require advanced human capital. There can be no modernization of the economy — and of society — without the modernization of higher education,” Guriev told The Moscow Times.

A request for comment on the rankings sent to Moscow State University on Friday went unanswered as of Wednesday night.

Moscow State University has proved that it is possible to get into an international ranking by cooperating with researchers, but some Russian universities that win praise inside the country just do not aspire to get into the international ratings.

“We consider those ratings incorrect,” said Andrei Volokhov, a spokesman for the prestigious Bauman State Technical University.

“For us, the evaluation by employers is more important. And both Russian and foreign employers hold our graduates in high esteem,” Volokhov said by telephone.

He said the university focuses more on domestic ratings, where it is ranked as one of the best

in the country.

Peoples' Friendship University, which is also considered prestigious in Russia and is popular among foreign students, has not entered the competition for any international rankings. Spokeswoman Galina Kuzmina said the university would like to win “an important ranking” but does not make any extra efforts to prove its high standards.

“We have a web site where all the data are open to everyone,” she said. “So researchers [from Times Higher Education World University Rankings] can get anything they need there.”

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