

Carrots for the Most Talented Students

June 22, 2011

The  Moscow Times

In one of the sessions on Saturday at the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum, an important topic of discussion was a new government financial aid program for Russian university students who are accepted at foreign universities.

This program is badly needed. Take, for example, a recent and quite typical case involving a graduate of the New Economic School in Moscow. He was accepted to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology graduate school but was not among the top seven foreign students given a full-paid scholarship by MIT. As a result, he had to attend a different, less prestigious university that did offer a full scholarship. But applicants to MIT from France and South Korea who had lower admissions rankings than the Russian student were fully funded by their governments to attend the university.

Now the government is close to approving a program to finance Russian students admitted to the world's leading universities. There is one component of the program that crucial to its success: The authorities will not be involved with the selection of Russian students who will receive aid, thereby avoiding the possibility of corruption and favoritism. Instead, the government will pick a dozen or so foreign universities, and any Russian student who is accepted into any one of them is automatically eligible for financial aid.

Kazakhstan and Tatarstan are pioneers in these programs, and representatives of both spoke at the forum. Several Kazakh ministers hold diplomas from leading European universities, and Tatarstan has already sent 2,000 students to study abroad.

But there are some negative aspects to these programs as well. For example, Kazakhstan holds students' apartments as collateral to ensure that they return to work after graduation. If a participating student or his parents don't own an apartment, he has to convince a relative to put up his apartment as collateral to be eligible for the government funds.

The methods Tatarstan uses are not so draconian, but students are required to sign a letter promising to return.

In theory, neither of these measures is necessary. The best reward for Russians earning a foreign degree in the basic sciences — provided that they meet high academic standards — would be to guarantee a high-level postgraduate scholarship at home. Even better would be a guaranteed job offer with a leading Russian research center or university department.

According to Tatarstan's financial aid program, students are required to "pay back" the money by returning to the republic to work for a minimum of three years. This is a big detriment. During the forum session, Konstantin Severinov, professor of molecular biology and biochemistry at Rutgers University in New Jersey, said the most effective government aid programs for highly talented students offer carrots, not sticks. Instead of forcing students to return to their home countries, something should be offered to entice them back on a voluntary basis.

Of course, the most effective enticement would be if the home country was attractive on its own merits — if, for example, it had a good health care system, an independent legal system, a law-abiding police force and a rewarding research environment.

But that is too tall an order for Education and Science Minister Andrei Fursenko to fill on his own. One good incentive would be to guarantee returning postgraduates three- to five-year professorships at the institution of their choice. And the universities would benefit from that as well, because those teaching positions would be funded by the program now under consideration.

Konstantin Sonin is a professor at the New Economic School in Moscow and a columnist for Vedomosti.

The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

Original url:

<https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2011/06/22/carrots-for-the-most-talented-students-a7789>