

Education Reform Inching Forward

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A new bill aims to cut the number of higher educational institutions, leaving a smaller group of better-funded universities. Above, students sitting in front of the main building of Moscow State University.

Alexander Polyakov

As thousands of high school graduates enter universities on Saturday, a hotly debated bill to reform the nation's education system is inching forward.

A controversial plan already three years in the making, the bill promises the biggest shake-up of schools and universities since the 1990s, giving students more choice over the subjects they study and changing how universities are funded.

In late July, Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev sent the bill to the State Duma. It is expected to be signed into law by the end of the year.

"The law must not only resolve the problems of education, but become the basis for the development of human capital in the country," Medvedev said in a recent blog post.

The bill aims to cut the number of higher educational institutions, leaving a smaller cadre of better-funded universities that pack a more powerful punch in international rankings.

Currently, Russia features nowhere in the world's top 100 universities on benchmark rankings by Quacquarelli Symonds, or QS, and Times Higher Education.

Only on the Shanghai Jiao Tong listing does Moscow State University rate 77th, but even this reflects past Nobel glory rather than citations in academic journals, the currency of modern academia.

The education bill has been knocked by the University Professors Union for failing to increase teachers' salaries and criticized by Communists for narrowing the curriculum, allowing students to drop subjects in the ninth grade.

Many gripe about the Unified State Exam, the common university entrance exam introduced in the last decade with the intention of giving every student an equal chance at the best institutions.

But the bill has supporters among those seeking to modernize higher education.

It is very good that the government is trying to make higher education more open to competition and more modern, although it is not going to be easy, Sergei Guriev, rector of the New Economic School, said in an interview.

The bill legitimizes many progressive practices that some universities have already been experimenting with, he said, such as online teaching and joint programs between universities.

Skepticism About Reform

Ivan Kurilla, head of the international relations department at Volgograd State University, is skeptical about the government's ability to achieve its goals.

"When [President Vladimir] Putin speaks about education he usually speaks in the same vein as he speaks about pensions. For him, [education] is a burden," Kurilla said. "I think that education should be considered part of the economy if you want to ensure that Russia is more than an oil and gas exporter."

Kurilla worries that the reforms will fracture society and deepen regional divisions. Plans to reduce the number of students mean that poorer children will be less able to go to university, thus increasing social tensions, he said.

Meanwhile, focusing on top-tier universities means that some good departments could close and some regions risk losing their institutions altogether.

"There are a lot of regions with neither federal universities nor national research institutes," Kurilla said. "We have 80-something regions in Russia, but we don't have 80-something with universities that meet all the criteria."

"To get a better education people will leave the region," he added, "and it is unlikely that they will come back."

Problems in Russian universities mirror the story of the last two decades: falling student numbers reflecting demographic decline, corruption, low wages and resulting brain drain, over-weening central management, as well as hyper-dominant Moscow attracting talented people from poorer regions.

Russia spends less on education than the European average and even less than its BRIC peer Brazil — 4.7 percent of national income compared with 5.3 percent spent by its South American peer — although it still outspends China.

Corruption

Many argue that professors' salaries will have to rise if universities are to attract the best people.

The average wage for a Russian academic is \$617 a month, while peers in Canada and the United States earn almost 10 times more, according to research by Boston University and the Higher School of Economics.

In that survey of 28 countries, Russia's professors were the poorest, only slightly better off than their counterparts in Armenia.

Low salaries make it harder to root out corruption. Bribes to gain entry to an educational institution, including grade schools, or for better marks amounted to about \$1 billion in 2009, according to the Higher School of Economics.

Corruption "is a great problem for universities, which cannot trust their students' grades," said Professor Mark Levin, head of macroeconomics at the Higher School of Economics.

"If students bribe in one field they will continue after university, and if knowledge is bad we will get bad doctors, government engineers and professors — it is the reproduction of inefficiency," he said.

"It is necessary to reduce corruption in the whole country. If the atmosphere is corruptible, it is very difficult to eliminate corruption in one field."

The success of Russia's educational reforms will depend not only on the quality of the legislation and its implementation, but also on the social and political climate.

"The new education minister, Dmitry Livanov, is progressive, reform-minded and very motivated to do the right thing," said Guriev at the New Economic School. But "the record of this government in general, though, has so far not been good when it comes to openness and competition."

"This government doesn't seem to like freedom of speech, this government is not known for its international cooperation, this government doesn't like feedback from society, so we don't know [whether it can achieve its educational reforms]."

Breaking Into the Top 100

When not a single Russian university was included on the Times Higher Education list for the

second year in a row, Russia's then-education minister said it was time to come up with a new system of ranking universities.

Now the universities rather than the list-makers are back in focus, after Putin announced in May that five Russian institutions were expected to break into the top 100 by 2020.

Few doubt the goal is in reach, but many question the timing.

"Everybody, including Putin himself, understands that it is not realistic," said Zoya Zaitseva, director of Central Europe and Central Asia at QS.

Seven years is not enough time to implement all the things that need to be done, she said, although four or five institutions could be in contention for spots in the top 200.

Russian universities are relatively low in the QS rankings because those institutes lack kudos among their international peers and do not have their research cited often enough in academic journals, two of the criteria that QS uses to rank universities.

Russian professors need to learn English and participate in international conferences to share their ideas, Zaitseva said.

"Russian academics have a lot of good things to say," she said. "They have good labs and good projects, but they don't know how to promote themselves."

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