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Russia Must Globalize Its Universities

By Phil Baty

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Russian leaders have always been concerned about the failure of the country's universities to make it into the top 200 of the global university rankings — and rightly so.▣A country of Russia's size, rich intellectual history and economic strength deserves world-class universities that can compete with the very best universities in the world. Thus, it is not surprising that President Vladimir Putin issued a decree in 2012 that the nation should have at least five universities in the world's top 100 list by 2020. ▣

Some have argued that the global rankings are not fair on Russia, that they rely on a narrow Anglo-American model for university education and they reward research primarily published in the English language, which unfairly excludes the rich universe of Russian-language works. Some of this criticism is valid.▣It has been also argued that it would be better for Russia to develop its own rankings, better placed to capture unique local features of the higher education system in Russia and the former Soviet states.

But this approach has serious risks.▣Of course, proper benchmarking and performance monitoring of local goals and objectives against local metrics will be an important part of the

development of Russia's higher education system. The Ministry of Education and Science announced during a conference in late April that a multi-dimensional ranking of Russian universities will soon be developed by the National Training Foundation. This is an important and positive development.

But such an inward-looking approach must not come at the expense of an outward, global vision. National and regional rankings must not distract Russia's leading research institutions from aspiring to reach the recognized and established global benchmarks of the world rankings.

The Times Higher Education World University Rankings may be controversial, but they have a crucial role to play. They judge world-class research institutions against 13 separate performance indicators, balanced to reflect the full range of a top research university's mission: teaching, research, knowledge transfer and internationalization. The system was developed after 10 months of consultation with the global academic and student community and was refined with the help of an expert advisory group of more than 50 leading university figures from 15 countries. Most important, data is collected under a common set of globally accepted definitions, providing a unique global resource.

Russia must embrace these global metrics and standards. This means more of Russia's research should be published in the world's most prominent journals. In a globalized world, where ideas know no national boundaries, leading scholars must share knowledge to tackle the world's grand challenges together.

This inevitably means embracing English as the language of scholarly communication.
The National Training Foundation recently issued a paper recommending that Russia develop its own ranking system to help improve its universities. It is a sensible recommendation, but the paper also warns that while developing the national ranking, "experts stressed the need to follow the established rules and existing rankings' practices."

Indeed, while the long-term goal is to enhance Russia's global competitiveness, the World University Rankings must continue to be the primary benchmark of academic excellence.

Phil Baty is editor of the Times Higher Education World University Rankings.

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

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