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World-Class Universities Leave Russia Behind

By Mark Nuckols

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Once again, no Russian institutions figured into the top 200 universities worldwide, according to this year's annual Times Higher Education survey. The only Russian university in the top 400 was Lomonosov Moscow State University in the 226 to 250 range. The reputation of Russia's universities seems to be on the decline, as last year the same rankings placed Moscow State in the 200 to 225 range, joined by the Moscow State Physics Engineering Institute making an appearance in the 226 to 250 range. The reaction to consistently poor placing in these rankings ranges from indignation that Russia's universities can be judged inferior to bold declarations that by 2020 at least five Russian universities will be in the global top 100.

To make sense of the list it is first of all necessary to understand what this survey is actually ranking. Its criteria are heavily biased in favor of large-scale research universities. Over the last century and a half, the U.S. has perfected the model for the modern research university, combining teaching, scholarship and collaboration with industry. And in the post-war era, the U.S. government has taken a leading role financing basic research on a massive

scale through such agencies as the National Science Foundation, the Department of Energy, the Department of Defense and others.

Next year the Sochi Olympic Games will be a demonstration of how successfully Russia can provide the financial resources for and complete certain kinds of large scale projects. However, creating world-class universities requires extraordinarily complex coordination and execution of countless critical elements, something which Russia's bureaucracies are not particularly well known for.

What is more important than funding, however, is the environment of higher education in a given country. The universities that dominate the rankings, like Stanford and Cal Tech, have developed organically as communities of researchers have been built up over decades. Their development depended on environmental factors which are in short supply in Russia. An absence of corruption and high levels of trust among faculty, administrators and government officials grants top-rank universities extraordinary autonomy to pursue their academic mission. .

An option like establishing joint ventures with foreign universities with guaranteed funding and autonomy could bypass many of the problems that plague many Russian institutions and give new impetus to efforts to improve existing institutions by subjecting them to greater competition.

Collaboration with industry and business has been another key element in the rise to dominance by U.S. research universities. The universities produce basic fundamental research largely financed by U.S. government grants, but they are also a pipeline for innovations with commercial applications. Silicon Valley is an example of how a knowledge-based economy can be built upon cooperative efforts between academia and business, to the benefit of both and the larger community. For Russia to develop a more sophisticated knowledge based economy and diversify away from its current reliance on exporting natural resources, developing institutions which can lead in value creation and innovation must be a national priority.

Another problem with the idea of developing a world-class research university in Russia is that world-class scientists, including many Russian researchers, flock to more progressive countries. Perhaps due to media representation of anti-gay laws or a lack of free speech, most Western academics have little interest in moving to Moscow or St. Petersburg instead of New York, Cambridge or the Bay Area. If the many Russian scientists who have chosen to live and work in the U.S. or Europe could be convinced to return to their homeland, it might make it easier to convince foreigners to abandon Palo Alto for Vorobyovy Gory.

Right now there is a fierce competition among educational institutions around the world to attract the best talent, to conduct cutting edge research, to build world-class facilities and at least maintain their current standings, if not move up the rungs of international rankings. Governments that are truly committed to hosting knowledge-based economies are putting their shoulders to the wheel, making educational excellence a national priority. However, trying to create a big, world-class university in Russia could be worse than merely counterproductive. Russia can complete certain kinds of large scale projects, but creating a real university requires coordination ill-suited for Russian bureaucracy. Doing so will

absorb limited financial, administrative and human resources, with the former being an attraction for more corruption.

So what is to be done? There are plenty of fruitful initiatives that Russia could undertake without striving to create a mammoth educational powerhouse. One of the keys to the high performance of U.S. institutions is competition. Several Russian incumbents such as Moscow State can, with time, improve their academic and scholarly performance and gain better places in the rankings. But Russia does also have a handful of small scale educational institutions like the Higher School of Economics that, while not world-class, have established themselves as academic communities in part by forging alliances with foreign institutions. It would not such a huge investment to found universities modeled on the Qatar or Abu Dhabi examples of hosting satellite campuses for leading institutions. Even the presence of a few schools with strict admissions policies and high academic standards would provide desperately needed competition, complement Russia's existing efforts to improve the quality of higher education and serve as a laboratory for experimentation and innovation.

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