



World University Rankings as a Challenge to Improve Higher Education in Russia

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Abstract

The present article addresses the issue of arising need for Russian universities to enter high positions in the world rankings such as Times, QS World University Ranking. The phenomenon of ranking can be classified as an academic revolution which is under way in the educational environment all over the world. We have to admit that nowadays the mission of rankings implies something more rather than just defining the activity level of universities, they are becoming the pattern of globalization and marketization of the higher education systems and the instrument in "the fight for quality". The author runs the analysis of the ranking system criteria, focusing on QS, and describes the reasons preventing Russian universities from being at the first lines of the ranking table. Some initiatives undertaken by universities in the framework of the government program "TOP-100" are given by the author as an example. This program is urged to create eligible conditions to bridge the gaps between ambitions and existing resources and real capabilities. In a stepwise manner the author describes every criterion of QS Ranking while making an attempt to forecast the feasibility of these criteria and assessment of the current situation in the Russian universities. The findings of the analysis are the author's proposals as to revision of the national higher education methodology. In conclusion the author supports the idea that modernization of higher education in Russia should take into account the requirements of the ranking systems and perceive them as challenges to improve the system as a whole.

Publication of the world university rankings represents a new challenge to all university communities worldwide, specifically to highly ambitious national communities. Particularly, it refers to Russian university community that has become accustomed to consider Russian education to be the best in the world. Discrepancy between self-evaluation of the Russian universities and university assessments by the world ranking criteria generates hot disputes among university personnel. It also brings to life ambitious plans to prove to the world community that Russian universities are as good as the world university leaders.

Initially, rankings were designed as a way of comparative evaluation of university activities. However, in recent years, rankings have evidently being transformed to influence university administration, and even national policy of higher education. Therefore, rankings that determine indicators for university success are becoming more significant elements in the academic community that influence the development of international understanding of the quality of education, scientific activity and university functioning with regard to the world leaders [1].

University rankings reflect an integral evaluation of the training quality of graduates which is determined through statistical parameters of educational and research activity of the university, and characterized by qualitative indicators, which reflect opinions of reference groups such as: employers, representatives of academic and research communities, as well as students and university graduates. It should be noted that ranking is always a relative system; it is not designed according to any absolute indicators. Every time, the best indicator of the evaluation year is taken as maximum, and the remaining system is built up in accordance with that indicator. If we analyze a progress of changes among universities which take leading positions in rankings, an average indicator of changes in 2013 was 3.5, which is 1.1 less compared to 2012 [2]. Based on these figures, one can conclude that leading universities are not going to lose their ground. Every year fewer changes occur on the top of the ranking table. Annually, no more than 6-7 new universities enter the TOP - 100 universities;

however, it would be fair to say that in the past years the positions of these universities fell within the range of the first 20 universities, following the top 100 universities.

Consequently, the universities with high ambitions to reach the top of the ranking need to make incredible efforts and do something extraordinary, otherwise their chances are nil. As Alice from a famous novel by L. Carroll would say, “here we must run as fast as we can, just to stay in place. And if you wish to go anywhere you must run twice as fast as that” [3].

Understanding the necessity for Russian universities to integrate into the world net, which allows to not only expand scientific and academic relations but to distribute national and cultural values, has resulted in establishing revolutionary programs, which determine university development as research complex. For example, in 2013, the Russian Ministry of Education and Science announced the “5–100” contest to provide state support to the leading Russian universities to improve their competitiveness among acknowledged scientific and academic centers in the world. The main goal of this project is that no less than five Russian universities are to enter the top 100 world university by 2020.

Representatives of the Ministry and heads of universities recognize that for Russian universities this objective is difficult to implement because of specifics of the Russian educational system, which is explained primarily by historical isolation. If we take into account the basic limitations – language of teaching, weak infrastructure, low internationalization, and university staff, which are not ready to work under new conditions of collaborating with international partners, it will take not seven years but much longer [4].

At the same time, heads of universities demonstrate a shared vision that it is not the fact of entering the rankings which is important but those positive changes which may happen in the system of higher education of the country due to incentives that have occurred to gain high academic reputation on the world market of educational services. Further, let us consider criteria of the principal world university rankings, goals and objectives, as well as strategies and initiatives of the Russian universities to gain the world recognition.

Nowadays, there are three most famous academic rankings: 1) Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU), Shanghai Ranking (it has been published since 2003); 2) QS World University Rankings, QS ranking (published since 2000); 3) Times Higher Education World University Ranking — Thomson Reuters (THE), Times ranking (published since 2010) [4].

The goals of rankings are: 1) evaluation of higher education at all levels (education, science, administration, financing, and infrastructure); 2) providing consumers with reliable information about educational services. Most of the Russian universities are aimed at the QS ranking. The principal QS criteria are:

- 1) academic reputation (40%);
- 2) number of foreign specialists (5%);
- 3) employers’ evaluation of qualitative training of graduates (10%);
- 4) number of international students who study within educational programs of academic mobility (5%);
- 5) proportion of faculty members to the number of students (20%);
- 6) citation index (20%) [6].

Analysis of ranking criteria demonstrates that the highest and, consequently, the most significant criterion is academic reputation. Is this criterion difficult for Russian universities? Absolutely, yes. In this respect, the two most obvious reasons can be highlighted. First, it is low internationalization which is conditioned by the fact that Russian universities are not ready to implement educational programs in a foreign language. Second, low level of international relations among researchers of the scientific sector is conditioned by historical isolation coming from the Soviet times in connection with a weak financial component with regard to academic mobility of professors and researchers. As an indirect reason, which prevents from performing this indicator, is low percent of experts from Russia, who are currently only 1.4%, which means that, in the end, the chances of Russian universities can be no more than 2-3% of votes out of the total.

High bureaucratization, low internationalization, and weak international activity, in their turn, make it difficult to complete another criterion – the number of foreign specialists. And what is obligatory to be counted that a foreign professor has to be working at a Russian university for no less than three months a year. It is not that easy to find these professors, considering the fact that leading foreign scientists are not registered at unemployment agencies, they do not wait for favourable offers from Russia. So far, agreements have been reached by means of personal contacts only. Taking into account unstable economic situation in Europe, we hope that European professors will have more desire to work in Russia. However, keeping in mind political happenings in Russia and Ukraine, this opportunity is put back for an indefinite time. Professors need guarantees, and first of all, these guarantees are related to safety and security, and financial benefits.

The next criterion is employer's opinion. As a rule, this criterion is formed based on perception of the training quality of graduates and graduates' ranking on the labour market. For instance, if a university provides high-quality specialists to the labour market, they immediately become in high demand by large national and foreign companies. The basic reason for why it is difficult to comply with the criterion in Russia can be referred to low incentives and involvement of employers to take part in the training of specialists. It is well known that leading European universities develop and implement educational programs in close connection with industrial companies. In Russia these mechanisms are not adjusted, and if they exist, they work as a mere formality. Therefore, Russian employers do not consider university reputation as contribution to their business development. They are simply not interested in it.

In any case, it is necessary to look for added incentives in order to form mutually beneficial relations between a university and production, developing unique programs that allow a university to train exclusively competent specialists, who are ready to make bold decisions and perform unusual tasks. For this purpose, it is required to have integrated science and practice programs, top-ranked instructors experienced in production industry, well-developed facilities. It is realistic to do all the above, but it should be recognized that it will take much longer than 7 years.

The next indicator is the number of international students who study at Russian universities. Regardless of insignificant proportion (only 5%) of the total number, this criterion is difficult to complete, specifically for those universities which are located beyond the central region of Russia.

According to statistics, the proportion of foreign full-time students studying at Russian universities on a compensation basis is not high: in 2011-2012, around 125 000 students from neighboring and distant foreign countries studied in Russia. Of them, "real" foreigners, i.e. citizens from distant foreign countries, are a bit more than a half – 51%, from the CIS countries – 47%, from the Baltic countries – 1% [6].

What are the reasons which prevent from increasing a proportion of foreign students studying at Russian universities? The three most obvious reasons are: 1) geographic location, 2) insecure living, and 3) language of teaching.

If we take universities of Western Siberia and Ural, then the questions about climate conditions and available comfortable transportation lines arise. These two factors together do not help to attract foreign students to Russian universities. Taking into account that Russian scientific schools are not well known internationally, reputation of educational service has not been established yet, then, there is nothing to say about foreign students to be attracted to Russian universities.

As for insecure living, it does not depend much on universities themselves. A lot is determined by the political and economic situation in the country and the influence of mass media abroad which are able to create both positive and tense atmosphere. As an example, let us take situations that generate diplomatic claim on the part of EU and USA to Russia, such as: ban on gay propaganda, ban on adoption of Russian children by foreigners, and Ukraine crisis.

Frankly speaking, a crisis in Ukraine happened not on the right time in terms of the prospects of restructuring the system of Russian higher education and implementing initiatives to integrate into the world scientific and educational community. The latter is being done predominantly to establish and improve a reputation of Russia, and any diplomatic or political tensions between the great world

powers, including USA, do not provide benefit to Russia because they result in decreasing safety and attraction of the country as a potential place for getting education.

Now, a few words about the last reason that prevents from increasing the number of foreign students in Russian universities, which was mentioned above as “the language of teaching”. Obviously, it means English as a language of academic communication. The role of English as a principal language of academic and scientific communication has begun to grow unprecedentedly since the time when Latin dominated in university communities of the medieval Europe. Nowadays, a preference is given to the universities which use English as a principal language of academic and scientific communication, which proves that both education and research should not be limited by national boundaries [7].

An issue of publication activity is closely related to the next criterion – citation index (20%). Publication servers, data base, and other key resources happened to be owned by the top-ranked universities located in the USA and Great Britain. A proportion of Russian and English journals available in data base, which are used to calculate citation index is 1 to 46. In this regard, according to the latest statistic data, citation index of Russian scientists in international data base is only 1% [7]. The result is that publications in Russian may be scientifically significant, but nobody simply knows that.

Translation of publications into English could be a solution of this problem. However, it is only a part of the problem solution because it requires time to provide high-quality translation. After that, a translated research paper is reviewed and published. After publication it should take up to six months before the paper reaches scientific community and finds like-minded people who are supposed to ensure citation index to the author. Under the most optimistic projection, the entire process takes no less than one year.

In conclusion I would like to emphasize that for Russia to enter international education standards and to gain a high academic reputation, it is required to step outside the institutional education itself, thus providing the ground for reflection over it, analysis and consideration of its problems and horizons [9]. Nowadays, there is no need to focus on local internal transformation related exclusively to the development of material and human resources. Transformation should take place on a global level and focus on changing methodology of the education system. It will allow accepting challenges as incentives for transformation focused on reforming the system but not on its destruction.

What should we focus on? First of all, it is: 1) strengthening of relations between science and education, establishing scientific schools (including involvement of foreign scientists); 2) providing academic freedom to both students and academic personnel of universities; 3) reinforcing importance of personal professional contacts; 4) building up an institute for knowledge production and preparedness of graduates to produce this knowledge individually, guided by practical objectives of the modern Russian society; 5) improving linguistic competence that allows to expand significantly a catalogue of educational programs for foreign students; 6) developing a grant system to support students and PhD candidates, as well as scholarship competitions for talented students; 7) developing succession of generations while keeping national values and the best traditions of Russian education.

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