

analysis

The Russia paradox

It seems unlikely, but 40 per cent of Russia's universities are fee-paying. **Tatiana Kastueva-Jean** looks at their future.

The clear dividing line between Russia's state and non-state higher education establishments is evident even in official statistics and national ratings. During the 1990s it became a cliché that the non-state universities could not offer a good level of training. They were believed to have neither the necessary experience, equipment, nor permanent teaching staff, they accepted any solvent student, and delivered degrees that required little effort to obtain.

These criticisms, often repeated by senior higher-education officials, persist. Russia's employers—traditionally selective about the academic origins of their recruits—prefer graduates from well-known public institutions. Polls put private universities as a third choice after free, then fee-charging, public ones, so the social value of private degrees seems low and career prospects are compromised.

Despite these negative preconceptions, non-state higher education has assumed an important role in Russian economic and social life. Today, 474 private establishments (42 per cent of the total) train 1.3 million students (17 per cent of the total). Another paradox is the Russian authorities' boundless admiration for such US private universities as Harvard and Stanford, which are held up as models for Russia's public universities.

Some characteristics of private universities fuel the disdain of their public colleagues. The majority (71 per cent) of their students follow part-time evening or correspondence-courses. They are small: 2,700 students on average compared with the state institutions' 9,400. The humanities, social sciences, law, economics and management account for 93 per cent of all their students. The first technical private universities to appear remain the great exception. This specialisation is easy to understand: humanities do not need heavy investment in equipment or laboratories; and the private sector in the 1990s responded to an increasing economic demand for such "new market" jobs.

At the same time, public universities, even those with a technical profile, created all sorts of paying programmes for jurists, managers and economists that gave them considerable income against a background of chronic state under-funding. Some public establishments have now closed programmes that do not match their original specialisation, but the major-

ity have not. This market remains lucrative—60 per cent of Russia's students pay for their studies: 4.5m students out of 7.5m, 3.2m of them in public universities.

The "paying public" and private universities occupy the same niche in the market and court the same clientele, students who can afford to pay for studies and are not sufficiently prepared for access to "public free of charge" courses. The Duma education committee's deputy chairman, Gadzhimet Safaraliyev, said earlier this year in the business newspaper *Kommersant* that, "the position of public universities is a 'predatory' one; they want to protect their territory and the best strategy for this is to accuse the private sector of providing low quality of training."

The real situation is more complex. The private sector is not homogenous. Stories of "sales of degrees" by "pseudo-universities," which appeared regularly in the press in the 1990s, are less common today. Some private universities have built excellent reputations. The Russian New Economic School founded in 1992 competes with the renowned State University Higher School of Economics. As a sign of its international recognition, NES hosted Barack Obama during his first presidential visit to Russia. Most private universities are accredited by the Russian state so have to meet the same criteria as public ones. The way they operate, the content of programmes and the organisation of curricula are identical. Even the problems they face are similar: ageing staff, weak internationalisation and academic mobility. These factors undermine criticism on quality of training, but at the same time reduce Russia's future chances of developing an alternative elite to that from public schools.

The future is uncertain. Russia's demographic crisis accentuates the competition for students between public and private institutions. In 2009, private schools had 10 to 15 per cent fewer students than the year before. Non-state universities bemoan public policy that clearly favours state establishments, refusing private universities access to public funding and tenders, and tax advantages. Last year, 22 private universities closed because of economic and demographic crises. The prognosis is not bright: according to experts, at best 35 per cent will disappear in the next five to seven years. Thus, Russian private higher education is entering decline before it has even reached maturity.

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