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 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-