

letter from russia tatiana kastueva-jean

Russia's government pins hopes on universities not academy

The latest international research report from Thomson Reuters says one thing about Russia: the country's share in global scientific activities—publications or patents—is small and declining. Its *Global Research Report* (January 2010) puts Russia's share of the world's indexed papers at 2.6 per cent, compared with China's 8.4 per cent. Only 0.4 per cent of patents submitted in Europe and in the United States come from Russia (China submits 3.7 per cent).

Russia's government is counting on Russia's universities to rectify the situation. Yet, in Soviet Russia, the Russian Academy of Science, not universities, carried out research. The decision to entrust research to universities can be partly explained by difficult relations between the government and the academy: despite some excellent research centres, the academy remains conservative, aged and overstuffed.

In 2004, higher education was declared a priority and significant sums were injected into universities. But not every university benefited. Minister of higher education Andrey Fursenko has repeatedly said that only 150 to 200 of Russia's 3,500 existing universities, including subsidiaries, ensure a good quality of training. The applied strategy is to support only the most promising.

So higher education is being restructured. The process really began with the Education National Project (2005-07) under the then First Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev. The 57 selected universities got funding, sometimes representing half or more of their annual budgets, principally for the modernisation of equipment and teacher training. This distribution of funding by calls for tender organised by the Ministry of Education and Research was revolutionary. Recently, three new categories of university have been created.

First, federal universities; one in each of the seven Russian federal districts. Two pilots—Southern and Siberian (in Rostov-on-Don and Krasnoyarsk, respectively)—were created in 2006, and five others were announced in 2009. Politically, another is necessary, because an 8th federal district, North Caucasus, was created in January. Each federal university, a merger of several local universities and sometimes other-level educational establishments, will get \$13 million (10bn euros) a year for three years.

Second, 14 national research universities each receiving \$60 million over five years are planned. The majority have a technical profile and half are situated in the regions. The second call will be

organised this autumn. In official discourse, the federals provide high-skilled labour to regions while the nationals will develop selected technical fields (nuclear, metallurgy and so on) to compete at the international level.

Third, at the end of 2009, Moscow and Saint-Petersburg State Universities—both in the Shanghai and Times Higher Education international ratings—were awarded the top status, national patrimony. They will be financed by a special line in the state/federal budgets. Their rectors will be appointed directly by the President.

Some choices appear arbitrary. Why was Krasnoyarsk chosen for Siberian Federal University not Novosibirsk with its famous university linked to Siberian Branch of the academy? Why a special status just for the two biggest? Obviously, politics and lobbying were involved.

The fate of the rest, not included in what Medvedev calls this "pyramid", is unclear. They can choose to improve their programmes to be selected in future calls for tender, to merge to become stronger or to disappear amid demographic decline and lack of students.

The new universities are asked to develop strong connections between education, research and innovation. Universities now not only have to train people but produce research and create and even commercialise innovative products in their technology parks, business incubators and start-ups. In a speech at Novosibirsk University in April [*RE 29/4/10 p4*], Putin said the government expects a return on its investment, including patents for inventions and the creation of small profitable enterprises. Clearly, the Russian ideal is based on MIT or Stanford in the US.

For many people, the decision to channel money into universities is a mistake because of their weak research. Today only an eighth of universities conduct research; their share of internal R&D spending is 6.1 per cent. The very notion of innovation is often arguable; sometimes something already existing can be presented as "innovative" just to try to obtain money from government. Another uncertainty is that public funding is promised only for three or five years, just to launch a positive dynamic. The big challenge for universities will be to convince the business community to invest in higher education. Otherwise, after a very short "golden age," it will be difficult for them to finance their very ambitious development programmes.

More to say? Email comment@ResearchResearch.com

Tatiana Kastueva-Jean is a research fellow at the French Institute of International Relations, Paris.

'Some choices appear arbitrary. Obviously, politics and lobbying were involved.'