

# Wrong road to Harvard

Despite making all the right moves, says **Tatiana Kastueva-Jean**, Russia is unlikely to achieve its higher education goals.

Russia dreams of its own Harvard; or several, given the country's size. It's a matter of national prestige and economic importance. To have internationally recognised leaders can boost higher education and help improve human potential at a time of demographic decline.

But a May 2010 report from the National Bureau of Asian Research identified a Russian "education mirage": that it was well-placed in terms of the number of higher degrees conferred and average years of schooling completed, but weak in international patents and number of articles cited, and prone to low labour productivity.

The international indicators seem contradictory. The latest OECD figures put Russia among the biggest emerging players in international education, with almost 4 per cent of the world's international students. But not even the Moscow or Saint Petersburg state universities appear in the last top 200 *World Universities Ranking*.

One of the Russian government's answers is to create a network of leading "federal universities" by merging existing state institutions within the regions. Two pilots were created in 2006 in Rostov-on-Don, southern Russia, and in Krasnoyarsk, Siberia. Six more have been created more recently in Kazan, Arkhangelsk, Yakutsk, Kaliningrad, Vladivostok, and Yekaterinburg. Federal status carries extra government funding: each university will get about €119 million for the first five years. In a speech at Novosibirsk University in April 2010, Prime Minister Vladimir Putin said the government expects a return on its investment, including patents for inventions and the creation of small productive enterprises. This strategic mission to integrate education with research and innovation exceeds the traditional view of a university. But the authorities hope local excellence will boost global competitiveness to take at least two federal universities into the top 200 by 2020.

It is too early to evaluate the project's impact, but there are threats to its success. In his book *The Challenge of Establishing World-class Universities*, World Bank higher-education expert Jamil Salmi explains three essentials: a concentration of talent, abundant resources and appropriate governance. As yet, Russia's new federal universities do not meet these requirements.

First, low salaries prevent them from recruiting top professors and researchers. The average teacher's age is 50 to 52. The proportion of masters students is only

2 to 3 per cent—compared with 35 to 60 per cent for world-leaders—most recruited internally. Stipends for PhD scholarships are €36 a month. The number of foreign students—1 to 3 per cent, say the universities—compares with Harvard's 19 per cent and 18 per cent at Cambridge.

Second, the average spend per student in the Ural Federal University, for example, is about \$3,500 (€2,600) compared with an average \$30,000 in the United States and \$14,000 in the OECD countries. Only the Far Eastern Federal University is promised a new campus: on Russky Island in 2012. Over half of federal university revenue is to come from student tuition fees; that from R&D is low and there are no endowments so far.

But the biggest concern is governance and autonomy. The federal universities are formally autonomous institutions. There are promising changes, particularly at senior management level: the "new" rectors are now professional managers from outside; and each university now has a Council of Trustees. But that has much less influence than the rectors, politically appointed by the President himself.

Autonomy does not leave the universities free to make strategic decisions or allocate resources. They have no say in budget management, admissions rules or appointment policy, nor can they set the amounts of salaries or scholarships. The same bureaucratic procedures and administrative rules apply as to other institutions. Some constraints, such as the prohibition on using their extra funding for R&D, seem absurd. Investment in equipment is clearly preferred over investment in human capital. Governance is inflexible and the bureaucracy formidable.

So, on the surface, higher education reforms undertaken by Russia correspond to trends in most countries: mergers, autonomy, increased funding, creation of indicators of performance, and investment only in the most promising "points of growth." But if these universities' development programmes are ambitious, the means to achieve them are weak and constraints abound. The Russian authorities cannot overcome inertia and old-fashioned reflexes. Increased funding alone is unlikely to speed Russia into an "educational great power", even though higher education is becoming the dividing line between dynamic emerging countries and those making limited progress.

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