ПРОБЛЕМЫ ОБРАЗОВАНИЯ

Responses to the Challenges of Training and Retaining Scholars in Russian Academia

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The Russian higher education system is currently facing the mounting challenges of competition, internationalisation, restrictions on academic freedom, inequalities in access, massification, academic dishonesty and corruption. This paper discusses how Russian universities are able to develop, attract and retain academics in the profession under such difficult conditions. Analysing two recent and ongoing large-scale measures — the reform of doctoral education (staff development) and effective contracts (employee retention) — the author argues that the remaining improper dependencies among the actors and institutions involved should be considered more seriously. This case might be applicable beyond Russia and other post-Soviet countries, as anticorruption reforms can often result in unintended consequences.

Keywords: academic profession, institutional corruption, reforms, Russia, university

Introduction

Russia, like the Soviet Union before it, has been considered to have of the leading educational systems in the world, particularly during the Cold War, when it was held up in opposition to the US. Today, after some turbulent times, Russia is a fast-growing academic superpower [Altbach 2016]. The Russian higher education system, perhaps

more than other academic systems in the world, faces challenges in higher education such as heightened competition between educational institutions, internationalization, the restriction of academic freedom, inequalities in access, massification to the point of universalisation, and corruption, defined as the abuse of entrusted power and the lack of academic integrity [Denisova-Schmidt 2019]. How do universities manage to develop, attract and retain academics under such tough conditions? To answer this question, I use the analytical framework of institutional corruption and focus on two recent large-scale measures: the reforms of doctoral education and of academic contracts and salaries.

Institutional corruption is not traditional corruption as suggested by Transparency International, and it is not a term that is usually applied in studies covering corruption in academia in Russia or beyond (see recent discussions in [Glendinning et al. 2019; Osipian 2019; Bretag 2020; Chirikov et al. 2020; Denisova-Schmidt (1) 2020; Sabic-El-Rayess, Heyneman 2020]). Rather, institutional corruption is 'a literal homonym' the term does exist in Russian academia, but with a different meaning—of a term used among Russian scholars, 'institutional'naia korrupciia'. It is considered 'an influence [...] that weakens the effectiveness of an institution, especially by weakening public trust in that institution' [Lessig 2018, p. 25]. As a form of dependence corruption, institutional corruption is largely about improper dependencies among actors and institutions [Rumyantseva, Denisova-Schmidt 2015]. Many US academics, for example, are employed at universities, but do not receive a salary from their employers; instead, their positions are often funded by external public or private organizations. This type of dependency may influence their research and other obligations related to academia. A scholar evaluating the effectiveness of a drug may not be in a position to criticize a new product developed by his or her sponsoring pharmaceutical company. This influences public trust in the services and products that are recommended or discredited by science. In post-Soviet countries, in particular, the budgets of public universities are often determined according to the number of students, which often gives rise to improper dependencies among those involved. Universities feel the need to keep student enrolment high in order to cover their financial obligations; this often leads them to ignore poor academic performance or even academic misconduct.

Doctoral Education Reform¹

The traditional doctoral education (*aspirantura*) in Russia was adapted from the German model:² there was no additional training in the discipline and the focus was on individual research and cooperation with a scientific advisor³. Hence, the role of the advisor, his or her status and influence in the academic community and beyond, and his or her willingness and ability to share relevant information with a young researcher and introduce him or her to existing networks were crucial. The situation is changing, however. The 2012 Law on Education considers people in PhD programs as PhD *students*, which had not

See the recent study on doctoral education in Russia and beyond [Yudkevich, Altbach, de Wit 2020].

The entire higher education system in the Soviet Union was based on the German higher education system.

³ PhD programs were seen as recruitment channels for academia (especially in Soviet times) [Bednyi 2020]

176 E. Denisova-Schmidt

been the case before; it also introduces new standards for PhD training and stipulates the financing of universities offering PhD programs [Yudkevich 2015].

Although Russian universities are authorized to award advanced degrees, their decisions are coordinated and verified by a federal agency—VAK (*Vysshaia attestatsionnaia komissiia*, Higher Attestation Commission).⁴ VAK was established in 1932 and has been subordinate to the Ministry of Education (1932–1975, 1991–1998), the Council of Ministries of the Soviet Union (1975–1991), the *Rosobrnadzor (Federal'naia sluzhba po nadzoru v sfere obrazovaniia i nauki*, Federal Agency of Supervision in the Sphere of Education and Science) (1998–2016) and to the Ministry of Education and Science since 2016. VAK is responsible for setting up dissertation councils at universities⁵ and defining the number and the quality of publications required for an advanced degree and the content of the exams,⁶ among other duties. Russian universities suggest candidates for a degree and the VAK approves them after a review.

All defences in Russia are open to the public and are made available to dissertation councils usually consisting of 20 to 25 experts. This is in contrast to many western European universities within the Bologna system, where the defence may be public, but often only two supervisors are in charge, or at UK universities, where two advisers are responsible for supervising and two completely different professors conduct the exam. In Russia, the presentation and the discussion are videotaped, transcribed and submitted to VAK. The dissertation is accessible one month prior to the defence and evaluated by a supervisor, two external experts and one external organization. The avtoreferat—the main study outcomes usually summarized in 20-25 pages—are accessed by at least five external referees and sent out to at least 30 Russian libraries after the candidate has passed the examination. The problem is not this system, which might be one of the best in terms of academic and administrative safeguards [Osipian 2012], rather, the improper dependencies of the actors involved: candidates who believe they might be more successful in their professional lives with academic degrees and members of dissertation councils who do not want to be too critical of other candidates in the hope of ensuring the same attitude for their own students.⁷

⁴ As of January 2021, there were 29 organizations in Russia authorized to issue degrees independently without VAK approval. While this would be a very interesting case to study, these organizations still remain in the minority and are not included in the current research.

⁵ Dissertation councils (*dissertationnye sovety*) at universities are a fixed group of experts in their fields, usually representing different universities and sometimes different cities. They are responsible for assessing dissertations. Not all universities offering doctoral programs are allowed to host dissertation councils [*Osipian* 2012].

⁶ kandidatskii minimum – the three exams for PhD candidates are philosophy, one modern language and the discipline in which the thesis is written.

One additional concern is the growing number of dissertations of poor quality as well as fake dissertations, the widespread scope of which has become public mostly due to the work of *Dissernet*. *Dissernet* is an online community of scholars, journalists and other experts investigating plagiarism and other misconduct in dissertations and, more recently, in academic papers and journals [Kopotev et al. 2021]. Originally, *Dissernet* activists and other experts argued that the social sciences—and economics in particular—seemed to be one of the most favoured disciplines for fake dissertations, while these were relatively rare in the natural sciences [Osipian 2012; Rostovtsev 2015]. Recent studies have disproved this assumption, however: problematic dissertations are widespread in all disciplines [Makeeva et al. 2020]. Many Russian decision makers and scholars do not support such radical anti-plagiarism activism, however. One of their main concerns is the discrediting of Russian science [Golunov 2014]. Nevertheless, the problem of academic dishonesty needs to be taken more seriously. Abalkina and Libman, for example, found a correlation between plagiarism in PhD theses and the performance of decision makers: cheating in dissertations tends to manifest itself again in subsequent careers, especially in infrastructural development in the Russian regions [Abalkina, Libman 2020].

The doctoral reform addressed many of these issues, but several problems still remain, such as improper dependencies between a scientific advisor and his or her students and the tendency to view a PhD as a commodity.

Improper dependencies: Currently, a faculty member (a potential scientific advisor) needs at least three successfully defended dissertations, in addition to some other academic achievements, in order to receive the title of professor. In the Russian academic system, the term 'professor' means more than a position within a university (dolzhnost'), rather it is a title, an award or a rank (zvanie) only.⁸ The Russian academic system differentiates between the title of professor awarded internally (within an organization) and externally (by VAK). In the latter case, the person cannot be fired, a very important incentive in times of uncertainty. Hence, a faculty member might want to have at least three successfully defended dissertations by any means possible.

Table 1. Gender and age balance among PhD students at Russian universities

		age in years										
	total	22 and under	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30-34	35–39	40 and above
2007												
total	147719	19713	29092	30021	20115	12172	7570	4950	4046	9300	5037	5703
male	84399	12920	19094	19510	12125	6528	3338	1963	1595	3236	1844	2246
female	63320	6793	9998	10511	7990	5644	4232	2987	2451	6064	3193	2457
2015												
total	109936	4815	13423	18420	17178	12838	8675	5920	4772	11457	6001	6437
male	57372	2796	8050	10853	9642	6860	4101	2619	2120	4904	2608	2819
female	52564	2019	5373	7567	7536	5978	4574	3301	2652	6553	3393	3618
2018												
total	90823	663	4281	12349	15076	13225	8932	6125	4458	12496	6557	6661
male	49803	386	2846	8124	9430	7591	4679	2927	2104	5735	3009	2970
female	41020	277	1435	4225	5646	5634	4253	3198	2354	6759	3548	3691

Source: adopted from [Bondarenko et al. 2017, p. 156; Bondarenko et al. 2020, p. 200].

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⁸ This practice is different from many other countries, where everyone involved in education – including secondary school teachers – is called professor (e.g., in Latin America) or where the academic title of doctor or professor is part of the name and people are often addressed by these titles in situations outside of academia (in Germany and especially Austria, where academic titles have, until recently, been applied even to spouses).

Viewing a PhD as a commodity: Enrolment in PhD programs provides a means for male candidates to avoid compulsory military service. Table 1 shows the gender balance of PhD candidates (there is a greater number of male candidates until the age of 27, the recruiting age limit for military service). A PhD might also be considered by some students as a validation of quality for future non-academic employment [Yudkevich 2015]. Table 2a illustrates the number of enrolled PhD students and Table 2b the number of PhD graduates by discipline.

Table 2a. Enrolment in doctoral programs at Russian universities

Year	2000	2005	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
the number of PhD students per the end of year	117714	142899	157437	156279	146754	132002	119868	109936	98352	93523	90823

Source: adopted from [Bondarenko et al. 2017, p. 155; Bondarenko et al. 2020, p. 199].

Table 2b. Number of graduates from doctoral programs at Russian universities

Disciplines	2000	2005	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017*	2017 [†]
Math and Physics	1933	1843	1771	1910	2106	2069	1669	1230	1677	907	143
Chemistry	725	823	878	806	935	919	694	497	658	428	106
Biology	1354	1616	1680	1750	1763	1740	1371	1235	1437	763	104
Technical	6279	7480	7761	7547	8491	8738	7282	6723	7286	3079	466
Agricultural	1047	1212	1078	1074	1188	1212	1024	1006	954	381	96
History and Archaeology	892	1219	1093	1003	1074	1072	932	855	823	219	28
Philology	1320	1724	1573	1509	1516	1556	1323	1248	1204	443	55
Philosophy	607	729	670	669	719	675	555	492	475	162	19
Art history	438	635	521	431	569	558	549	304	287	97	12
Psychology	483	694	770	735	854	718	621	544	504	169	7
Economics	3807	6009	5887	5507	5800	5479	4040	3839	3206	1030	72
Pedagogy	1414	2159	2179	2084	2202	2095	1800	1580	1437	529	46
Sociology	391	634	548	633	634	571	460	423	387	123	11
Law	979	2222	2554	2494	2309	2270	1737	1461	1371	497	24
Political science	199	360	466	497	456	458	393	392	385	130	4
Medicine	1730	2707	2798	2865	2671	2883	2429	2611	2577	1213	219
Geoscience	971	1160	1159	1111	1422	1299	1103	1104	1050	336	29
Others	259	335	377	457	453	421	291	282	32	106	14

Note: The data for 2017 shows the number of graduates (2017*) and the number of defended dissertations (2017†) *Source:* adopted from [*Bondarenko et al.* 2017, p. 157; *Bondarenko et al.* 2020, p. 201].

Academic Contracts and Salaries: Past

During the Soviet era, the academic profession was highly prestigious. People working in academia enjoyed various monetary and non-monetary rewards, including (to some extent) academic freedom, stability, permanent contracts and high salaries [Androushchak, Yudkevich 2012]. This situation changed dramatically after the collapse of the Soviet Union, however. The average salary in higher education was about 90% of the general average salary in 1990, while in 1998 it fell to less than 60% and in 2000 to 50%. Salaries in the higher education system averaged 1,226 RUB (~40 USD) per month, amounts that 'have never been so low, even during World War II' [Smolentseva 2003]. In 2000, the monthly cost of living ranged between 100 and 150 USD, a fact that forced many faculty members either to change professions or to look for additional sources of income. Androushchak, Kuzminov & Yudkevich [2013] estimated that up to 50% of all faculty members left Russian academia during that period, either to another labour sector within the country or abroad (up to 7%). Faculty members with part-time jobs were not uncommon in the USSR, but in the new Russia, the scope of these activities changed dramatically, becoming a massive phenomenon. Teaching in other departments or institutions, private tutoring and consulting were the main activities engaged in to survive. 'No one is affiliated with just one institution. Faculty members teach many courses, and one may teach courses in sociology, philosophy, management, marketing, and a species of arthropods. Anything, just to get paid,' reported a professor from Nizhnii Novgorod [Smolentseva 2003]. Describing faculty recruitment at that time, Kuzminov [2011] claims that candidates looking for a job within academia were either professionals for whom the monetary compensation was less important or employees with low self-esteem who were not qualified for jobs outside of universities or people looking to potentially misuse their positions for private gain.

This all happened within a context of inadequate resources for teaching or research, including the impossibility to provide every faculty member with an office, office supplies and furniture [Smolentseva 2003; Androushchak, Kuzminov, Yudkevich 2013]. This created fertile ground for improper relationships between faculty members and students who were prepared to offer a service or even cash payments in exchange for preferential treatment or a better mark. According to a survey of university teachers in 2005 referenced by Androushchak, Kuzminov & Yudkevich [2013], more than 50% of the respondents between the ages of 25 and 30 were ready 'to accept material remuneration from a student in exchange for some study-related services'. This sentiment was shared by 30% of faculty members over the age of 40, 20% of those over 50 and only 10%

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Graham and Dezhina distinguish four waves of brain drain: 1) the late 1980s to the early 1990s, which often saw leading scholars with international reputations emigrate as ethic Germans and Jews to Germany, Israel and the United States; about 70% found new positions in academia and/or research organizations in their new home countries; 2) 1992–1993, during which time, scholars in the hard sciences, such as physicists and mathematicians (50%), biologists (30%) and chemists (20%) were leaving for Germany, Israel and the US, but only 20–40% from them stayed in academia; 3) 1994–1998, which saw mostly biologists representing such fields as genetics, molecular biology and virology as well IT specialists depart for the US; and 4) from 1999, when about 1,400 researchers from many disciplines emigrated annually [Graham, Dezhina 2008, pp. 24–25]. The reasons for leaving Russia vary from low salaries to shortages of research equipment and facilities, declining prestige of academic profession and the political instability in the country.

180 E. Denisova-Schmidt

of those over 65. Students could gain favour with a faculty member by making photocopies, purchasing books or repairing labs, classrooms and offices [*Leontyeva* 2010]. Salaries in the Soviet Union, and later in post-Soviet Russia, were calculated according to a unified state system that stipulated the minimum salary and additional rewards for academic rank and title [*Smolentseva* 2003]. This system was ultimately abolished in 2008 in favour of a new system that was intended to give universities more flexibility in paying their faculty members and staff.

Academic Contracts and Salaries: Present

In 2012, 10 universities introduced 'efficient contracts' or 'performance-related pay' (PRP) [Gershman, Kuznetsova 2016], which all universities were expected to implement by 2018. The only condition was that the amount of incentive payments should comprise no less than 30% of the total amount of funding for salaries, drawn from the federal budget. Overall, the average faculty salary increased to 144.7% of the average salary throughout Russia. Thus, the average academic salary was 40,400 RUB (~1,347 USD) in 2013 and 47,200 RUB (~1,180 USD) in 2014. The Ministry of Education and Science stressed that at least 65% of salary of faculty should be fixed, a viewpoint also supported by trade unions [Kolesnikova 2015]. University administrators that were unable to achieve this goal of increasing faculty salaries could be dismissed, something that has happened to the rectors of several universities. One of those rectors, Vladimir Kolesnikov (Dmitry Mendeleev University of Chemical Technology of Russia, one of the leading universities in Russia), claimed that his organization needed more time to implement the new strategies. A drastic reduction in the number of faculty members could lead to an unhealthy climate, the former rector argued, and it would hardly be possible in 2015, the graduation year of both the last diploma specialists and the first bachelor's degree recipients. Moreover, the university employed more than just faculty members and the salaries of its other employees would have to be adjusted. More time was needed to attract the external research funding needed to boost the university budget, and STEM disciplines did not have a significant amount of self-funded students to address shortfalls [Kolesnikova 2015].

Efficient contracts, non-monetary compensation or academic rewards such as a passion for research, the joy of communicating with colleagues and students, and academic freedom should prevail over monetary compensation [Kuzminov 2011]. This is the optimal situation for a university lecturer, according to Kuzminov. Otherwise, the academic profession would become attractive for people interested only in monetary compensation and less in academic rewards. Universities have the authority to decide on the terms and the scope of PRP and they often stipulate such criteria as research and scientific activities, teaching and supervision as well as administration and other accomplishments. This approach is very close to the research—teaching—service formula

Often referred to as the 2012 'May Decrees' by President Vladimir Putin. One of the goals set by these decrees was a significant increase in the wages among public sector employees such as physicians, school teachers, university employees and other educators. The salaries of researchers should be equivalent to 200 per cent of the regional average by 2018 [Gershman, Kuznetsova 2016].

used for promotion at US universities. In 2015, for example, the Ural Federal University expected that a full professor would reach at least 200 points during one academic year, calculated either as 100 points for research, 60 points for teaching and 40 points for free choice, or 100 points for teaching, 60 points for research and 40 points for free choice. Very similar approaches are used at other universities. Achievements in research might include publications in leading journals indexed in Web of Science, Scopus or in Russian equivalents such as elibrary.ru and VAK-lists, as well as the publication of monographs, receiving grants, conference participation, a growing h-index or other scientific metrics. Teaching might include developing new courses or offering courses in foreign languages, encouraging students in research and project activities, the external assessment of student achievement or developing new teaching materials. Service might include the dissemination or transfer of research outcomes, membership of editorial boards or in scientific organisations, work in field specific committees, the attraction of new students or other forms of service to the discipline and to society [Sandler 2015].

The innovation is timely and transparent, but it is still unfair to some extent. The level of English proficiency among Russian faculty members is low [Yudkevich 2015] and expecting them to teach in a foreign language is an impossible demand. Assessments based on quantitative approaches create many options for potential manipulation. Several leading universities were accused of publishing in 'sham' journals, and one could hardly imagine how many unnecessary and 'sham' monographs and textbooks have been published and how many students have been successfully assessed by external auditors. Every one of these assessment criteria can be manipulated in a way convenient to all stakeholders. Faculty members are now more overloaded with paperwork than ever before [Denisova-Schmidt (1) 2020]. In spite of the many advantages effective contracts offer, they might lead to even more fraudulent research and teaching practices than Russian universities have experienced in the past. Many experts argue that increasing the salaries of teaching staff might reduce monetary corruption [Golunov 2014]. A low salary not only obliges some faculty members to look for additional income, but also explains accepting bribes in exchange for better grades, for example. Increasing salaries might at least reduce the incidence of compensation bribes [Roberts, Orttung 2015]. A competitive salary is crucial to attracting and retaining talented employees [*Altbach et al.* 2012; *Altbach* 2016].

Conclusion and Outlook

In recent years, Russian universities have achieved unprecedented results in spite of tough competition and internal and external pressures. Several reforms have been carried out in more than 724 higher education institutions [Altbach 2021]. Some of these reforms were successful, while others are still ongoing, including in the areas of PhD education and effective contracts. All these changes have a downside, however, and decision makers should consider improper dependencies among actors and institutions more seriously. The Russian case could be instructive beyond Russia and the other post-Soviet countries: like opening Pandora's box, reforms might result in unintended consequences.

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Российское высшее образование: ответы на вызовы времени в области подготовки молодых ученых и удержания персонала

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Российская система высшего образования, возможно, в большей степени, чем другие академические системы в мире, сталкивается с современными вызовами, такими как усиление конкуренции между образовательными учреждениями, интернационализация, ограничение академической свободы, неравенство в области доступности образования, массовизация вплоть до универсализации, а также академическое мошенничество. Как университетам удается готовить кадры для академической среды, а затем привлекать и удерживать таланты в таких сложных условиях?

Для того чтобы ответить на этот вопрос, в статье анализируются два блока крупномасштабных мер, принятых в России в последнее время: 1) связанные с аспирантурой, написанием и защитой кандидатских диссертаций, а также реформой последипломного образования (= подготовка молодых ученых); 2) направленные на повышение зарплат преподавателей и заключение эффективных контрактов (= удержание персонала). Для анализа выбран теоретический подход институциональной коррупции (калька с английского institutional corruption). Это не совсем совпадает с тем, что называется институциональной коррупцией в российской литературе. Возможно, здесь термин «коррупция» является даже лишним, потому что речь идет в первую очередь о зависимости институтов, акторов друг от друга при принятии решений. Иногда эта зависимость может быть легальной, но не всегда этичной. Например, американский депутат получает свой мандат; его кампанию спонсировала автомобильная промышленность, и вдруг он начинает активно участвовать в принятии новых законов, в которых заинтересована автомобильная отрасль. Что это? Отрабатывание денег, договоренностей? Или он действительно эксперт в этой области? Или другой пример: многие американские ученые работают в университетах, но не получают зарплату от своих работодателей; вместо этого их должности часто финансируются внешними государственными или частными организациями. Этот тип зависимости может повлиять на их исследования и другие обязательства, связанные с академическим сообществом. Например, ученый, оценивающий эффективность лекарства, не сможет критиковать новый продукт, разработанный его спонсором – фармацевтической компанией. Эта ситуация в свою очередь влияет на доверие общества к услугам и продуктам, которые рекомендуются или дискредитируются наукой.

Такая же зависимость существует и в российской научной и образовательной среде между научными руководителями и аспирантами: наряду с общими научными интересами и желанием изменить мир к лучшему могут присутствовать и более прагматичные интересы (например, научному руководителю для продвижения по карьерной лестнице требуется определенное количество успешно защитившихся аспирантов, а аспиранту нужно получить отсрочку от армии). Эффективные контракты с педагогическими работниками, с одной стороны, действительно стимулируют и поощряют преподавателей, с другой, ставят их, а также сами вузы в зависимое положение. Основным критерием становится выполнение плана, а то, каким образом будут достигнуты необходимые показатели, оказывается вторичным. В связи с этим не следует удивляться высокому росту хищнических журналов и публикаций, а также игре в статистику.

Ключевые слова: академическая профессия, институциональная коррупция, реформы, Россия, университеты

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