

RUSSIA IS LACKING HIGH QUALITY INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Sergei Guriev



SERGEI GURIEV

is Russian economist and Rector of the New Economic School (Moscow, Russia). He serves as a

Member of the Presidential Council on Science, Technologies and Education, and is also columnist for the 'Vedomosti' newspaper and the Russian edition of Forbes magazine. In 2006, during the World Economic Forum in Davos, Sergei Guriev was selected as Young Global Leader. He has authored several books, the latest of which is 'Myths of Economy. Aberrations and Stereotypes Spread by the Mass Media and Politicians' (Moscow, 2009)

The educational system is a more conservative system than business and the modernisation of this system is a rather complicated task. We do not fully understand the actual state of things in the realm of Russian higher education and just how many problems we have in this sphere. Official figures indicate that, in Russia, there are more students per capita than in the United States. Is this a good or bad thing? Nobody actually knows. There are plenty of students pursuing higher education as a cover in order to evade military conscription. **In order to find out how many good institutions of higher education we actually have, it would be necessary to cancel con-**

scription one way or another. This is the first important measure to be taken in terms of educational modernisation.

The fact that there is a genuine lack of quality institutions of higher education in Russia is underlined, in particular, by the competition for the status of national research university, in which it proved to be rather difficult to choose twelve or fourteen institutions of higher education. Every four years, during the course of the Olympic Games, we can see what we are made of. At the same time, in the sphere of education, we continue to turn a blind eye and to convince ourselves that everything is not actually so bad. There is a way to cope with it – to try to enter external markets, both in terms of the graduates being produced and with respect to the educational programmes themselves.

It is for these reasons that we are in severe need of an internationalisation of the education system in Russia, so that we may accept students from abroad and send our graduates and students abroad as well, both to study and to work. Moreover, Russian institutions of higher education face the need to hire foreign professors and Russian-born professors who previously left the country, as well as they need to ease access to education and periods of residence in Russian for foreign students. Today, foreign students do come to study in Russia, but the multitude of existing routine problems does not allow the country to attract truly brilliant students. Apart from this, we also shouldn't brush off international ratings, but rather we should scrutinise them and determine what is wrong with our own educational system.

It is not exactly clear to what extent Russian higher education graduates are in-demand within the economy. According to different estimates, more than half of university graduates in Russia do not work according to their specialisation – essentially, institutions of higher education are training specialists that are not in demand on the domestic market.

Therefore, it is wonderful that, at present, we have at least one instrument that we can use to estimate the quality of

education – the Unified State Exam (USE). The results of USE from the previous year clearly indicated where exactly the market demand is at. Students with high USE results did not enter engineering institutions of higher education. It turned out that, with the exception of three or four leading natural science and technical institutions, the rest of the existing learning establishments were not able to attract students with good USE scores. **Although we speak a great deal about the lack of workers and engineers, economists and lawyers still tend to be paid better, even if they are only third-rate specialists.** That is precisely why the majority of students prefer to pursue studies that will allow them to become economists and lawyers. If we make the market more international, then our well-trained engineers will also be able to seek employment in the global labour market. And sooner or later, this will lead to a situation, whereby Russian salaries will comply with those at the international level, including those for engineers. Is it necessary to close existing institutions of higher education? Let such a question be determined by the market. If a university manages to earn money by teaching and employers clearly understand the value of its diploma, then there is no need to prohibit the university from offering instruction. Another issue that exists is how federal money should be spent. In this case, the Russian Government is pursuing the right path, having concentrated its resources on twenty institutions of higher education. This is a rather solid amount. **If at least three or four of our national research universities were to number among the first hundred top ranked in international ratings, that would be a major achievement.** In many European countries, we are talking about two or three universities that are capable of competing with the leading fifty American universities on par. I hope that, twenty years from now, there will be ten such universities in Russia. But, in order to achieve this, we will have to work very hard. ■

Exclusively for RJ