

# Transformation of the Russian Higher Education System

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## Abstract

The Russian higher education system has undergone significant transformation over the past century, with major changes occurring in the pre-Soviet, Soviet, and post-Soviet eras. In recent years, the system has been shaped by the introduction of the Bologna Process, changes in the structure of degrees, and the emergence of private universities. State funding and student financial assistance have played a critical role in financing higher education, as has the financing of research. Quality assurance measures have been implemented through accreditation of institutions, quality assessment of programs, and ranking of universities. The internationalization of higher education has been promoted through mobility of students and faculty, internationalization of curricula, and collaboration with international partners. Despite progress, the system faces challenges related to demographic changes, brain drain, and the need to develop a knowledge economy. Understanding these dynamics is important for policymakers, researchers, and students seeking to engage with the Russian higher education system.

**Keywords:** Russian higher education system, Bologna Process, private universities, state funding, financial assistance, research funding, accreditation, quality assurance, university rankings

## 1. Introduction

The Russian higher education system has undergone significant transformation over the past century, with major changes occurring in the pre-Soviet, Soviet, and post-Soviet eras. In recent years, the system has been shaped by the introduction of the Bologna Process, changes in the structure of degrees, and the emergence of private universities. This paper provides a comprehensive overview of the Russian higher education system, focusing on structural changes, funding and financing, quality assurance, internationalization, and challenges and opportunities facing the system.

Understanding these dynamics is important for policymakers, researchers, and students seeking to engage with the Russian higher education system.

## 2. Historical Overview of the Russian Higher Education System

### 2.1 Pre-Soviet Era

In the 18th century, Peter the Great, the Tsar of Russia, established the first universities in Moscow and St. Petersburg. These institutions were modeled after universities in Western Europe and aimed to provide higher education to the country's elite. The curriculum included

subjects such as philosophy, law, and mathematics. The first universities were primarily attended by members of the nobility and clergy, but over time, more people from the middle class began to attend.

By the early 19th century, the universities in Russia had expanded to include new subjects such as natural science and medicine. However, the universities remained under state control and were subject to censorship, making it difficult for students and faculty to engage in open debate and critical thinking.

### 2.2 Soviet Era

After the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917, the Soviet government implemented major reforms to the higher education system. The government nationalized universities and expanded access to higher education to include the working class. This was seen as a means of promoting equality and social mobility in the Soviet Union. The government also restructured the curriculum to prioritize fields of study that were seen as contributing to the country's industrial and agricultural development.

Under the Soviet system, higher education was viewed as a means to advance the country's socialist goals. Students were required to participate in political activities and to take courses in Marxism-Leninism. The government also used higher education as a means of social control, promoting the development of a loyal and obedient intellectual class.

Despite the limitations on academic freedom, the Soviet Union made significant achievements in science and technology during this era. Many Soviet scientists and scholars made groundbreaking discoveries in fields such as space exploration, physics, and mathematics.

### 2.3 Post-Soviet Era

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Russia underwent significant changes to its higher education system. The government shifted to a market-oriented approach, leading to the emergence of private universities and greater competition among institutions. Higher education became more decentralized, with regional governments playing a larger role in the funding and management of universities.

In the post-Soviet era, the curriculum shifted away from ideological education and towards a more practical and applied approach. The government introduced new programs in

business, finance, and management to meet the demands of a changing economy.

The changes in the post-Soviet era also led to challenges in funding and governance. The government faced difficulties in providing adequate funding for higher education, and many universities struggled to maintain quality standards. Despite these challenges, the post-Soviet era saw the emergence of a more diverse and dynamic higher education system in Russia.

#### 2.3.1 Decentralization of Higher Education

One of the major changes that occurred in the post-Soviet era was the decentralization of higher education. Regional governments gained greater autonomy in the management and funding of universities, leading to more diversity and innovation in the higher education system. The government also introduced new legislation to promote competition among universities, such as allowing for the establishment of private universities.

However, this decentralization also led to challenges in funding and governance. Regional governments often struggled to provide adequate funding for their universities, and some universities became dependent on external funding sources, such as private donors or international organizations.

#### 2.3.2 Introduction of New Programs and Degrees

In the post-Soviet era, the government introduced new programs and degrees to meet the demands of a changing economy. This included the introduction of new programs in business, finance, and management, as well as the development of new technical and vocational programs.

The government also made changes to the structure of degrees, aligning them with the European Higher Education Area through the implementation of the Bologna Process. This allowed for greater mobility of students and faculty.

The Bologna Process, which was initiated in 1999, aimed to establish a common higher education area across Europe by aligning degree structures, promoting student mobility, and facilitating the recognition of qualifications. Russia joined the Bologna Process in 2003 and committed to implementing the reforms. As a result, the Russian higher education system

underwent significant structural changes. The traditional system of Specialist degree (5-6 years) was replaced with a Bachelor's degree (4 years) and a Master's degree (2 years). This new system allowed for greater mobility of students and faculty, and facilitated the recognition of Russian degrees abroad.

Additionally, the emergence of private universities in the post-Soviet era was another significant structural change in the Russian higher education system. Private universities were given greater autonomy and were able to offer a wider range of programs, including those that were not traditionally offered by state universities. This led to increased competition among institutions and the diversification of higher education offerings in Russia.

Another notable structural change was the establishment of the Federal Universities in 2006. The government designated nine universities as Federal Universities, providing them with special funding and resources to enhance their research capabilities and international reputation. This designation aimed to position these universities as leading institutions in the country and promote their competitiveness on the global stage.

Overall, the structural changes in the Russian higher education system aimed to align it with international standards, promote greater competition and diversity among institutions, and enhance the quality of education and research in the country.

### **3. Structural Changes in the Russian Higher Education System**

#### *3.1 Introduction of the Bologna Process*

As previously mentioned, the Bologna Process was introduced in Russia in the early 2000s. This process aimed to create a unified system of higher education across Europe, including standardization of degree programs and increased mobility of students and faculty. This was intended to make it easier for students to study abroad and have their degrees recognized in other countries.

One of the key changes introduced by the Bologna Process was the adoption of a three-cycle system of higher education consisting of a Bachelor's degree, a Master's degree, and a Doctoral degree. This brought Russia in line with the rest of Europe, where this system had already been implemented.

#### *3.2 Changes in the Structure of Degrees*

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#### *3.3 Emergence of Private Universities*

The post-Soviet era saw the emergence of private universities in Russia. Prior to this, all universities were state-funded and operated under the control of the government. However, with the shift to a market-oriented economy, private universities began to appear, offering students an alternative to the traditional state-funded institutions.

The emergence of private universities led to greater competition in the higher education sector and provided students with more choices for their education. Private universities also had greater flexibility in the design of their programs and could be more responsive to changing market demands.

However, the growth of private universities also raised concerns about quality control and the possibility of diploma mills. To address these issues, the government introduced regulations and accreditation procedures for private universities.

Overall, the emergence of private universities in Russia contributed to the diversification of the higher education sector and increased access to education for students. However, it also highlighted the need for appropriate regulations and oversight to ensure that quality standards were maintained.

### **4. Funding and Financing of Higher Education in Russia**

#### *4.1 State Funding of Higher Education*

The Russian government has traditionally been the primary source of funding for higher

education in the country, with the bulk of funding allocated to public universities. However, the amount of funding has declined in recent years, which has led to financial challenges for many universities. According to the Ministry of Education and Science of the Russian Federation, in 2021, the total funding for higher education was around 423 billion rubles (\$5.7 billion), which is less than the amount spent in 2020. The decrease in funding has led to a decline in the quality of education, as universities have had to cut back on staff, research, and other resources.

#### 4.1.1 Changes in State Funding

The Russian government has historically been the main source of funding for higher education in the country. However, in recent years, the amount of funding has declined, leading to financial challenges for many universities. In 2018, for example, the government reduced funding for higher education by 3%, leading to concerns about the quality of education that universities can provide.

#### 4.1.2 Impact of Funding Changes on Higher Education

The decline in state funding has had a significant impact on the quality of education provided by universities. Many universities have been forced to cut back on staff, research projects, and other activities in response to funding reductions. This has led to concerns about the ability of universities to attract and retain top faculty and students.

#### 4.2 Student Financial Assistance

The Russian government offers a range of financial assistance programs for students, including scholarships, grants, and loans. However, the level of assistance provided is relatively low compared to other countries, and many students still struggle to cover the costs of tuition and living expenses. In 2021, the average monthly scholarship for a student in a public university was around 3,000 rubles (\$40), which is not enough to cover the cost of living in many cities in Russia. Additionally, the government's loan program for students is not widely used, as many students are reluctant to take on debt. Private scholarships and grants are available, but they are limited in number and highly competitive.

#### 4.2.1 Government Financial Assistance Programs for Students

The Russian government provides financial assistance to students in the form of scholarships, grants, and loans. These programs aim to help students cover the costs of tuition and living expenses. However, the level of assistance provided is relatively low compared to other countries, and many students still struggle to cover the costs of education.

#### 4.2.2 Private Financial Assistance Programs for Students

In addition to government financial assistance programs, there are also private financial assistance programs available for students. These include scholarships and grants from private foundations and organizations, as well as private loans. However, the availability of these programs can vary depending on the region and field of study.

#### 4.3 Financing of Research in Higher Education

Research funding in Russia is limited, and many universities struggle to finance research projects. As a result, many Russian academics collaborate with international partners to secure funding and access to research resources. The Russian government has implemented several programs to increase research funding and encourage collaboration with international partners, such as the 5-100 program, which aims to increase the global competitiveness of leading Russian universities. Private companies and foundations also provide research funding, but this is often tied to specific projects or interests.

#### 4.3.1 Government Research Funding Programs

Research funding in Russia is limited, and many universities struggle to finance research projects. To address this issue, the government provides a range of research funding programs for universities and researchers. These programs are aimed at supporting research projects in various fields, including science, technology, and social sciences.

#### 4.3.2 Private Research Funding Programs

In addition to government research funding programs, there are also private research funding programs available in Russia. Private foundations and organizations provide grants and funding for research projects in various fields. These programs are often highly competitive, with a limited number of grants available each year. Many Russian academics collaborate with international partners to secure funding and access to research resources.

Overall, the funding and financing of higher education in Russia continue to be a major challenge. While the government provides some financial assistance and research funding programs, the overall level of funding remains relatively low compared to other countries. As a result, many universities and students struggle to cover the costs of education and research, which can limit the quality and competitiveness of the higher education system in Russia.

## 5. Quality Assurance in the Russian Higher Education System

### 5.1 Accreditation of Higher Education Institutions

The Russian government has implemented a system of accreditation for higher education institutions to ensure that universities meet certain standards of quality. The process involves the Federal Service for Supervision in Education and Science (Rosobrnadzor), which is responsible for evaluating and reviewing higher education institutions. The accreditation process is designed to ensure that universities meet a set of criteria related to the quality of education, research, and management. Institutions must demonstrate that they have qualified faculty, adequate resources, and effective governance structures in place. The accreditation process also evaluates the university's academic programs, including the curriculum, student outcomes, and research activities.

### 5.2 Quality Assessment of Programs

In addition to accrediting institutions, the government also assesses the quality of individual programs of study. The Ministry of Education and Science is responsible for evaluating the quality of programs and has established a set of criteria that programs must meet to be considered high quality. These criteria include the quality of the curriculum, the qualifications of faculty members, and the research activities associated with the program. The Ministry of Education and Science evaluates these criteria using a combination of qualitative and quantitative data, including surveys of faculty and students, analysis of student outcomes, and review of research activities.

### 5.3 Ranking of Universities

Several organizations produce rankings of Russian universities, including the Times Higher Education World University Rankings and the QS World University Rankings. These rankings can be a useful tool for prospective students and researchers in assessing the quality of different institutions. Rankings are based on a range of criteria, including research output, international collaboration, academic reputation, and student outcomes. However, rankings are not without criticism, as they can be subjective and may not always accurately reflect the quality of a university or program. It is important for students and researchers to consider a variety of sources when evaluating the quality of higher education institutions in Russia.

**Table 1.** Number of Higher Education Institutions in Russia by Type and Ownership (2010-2020)

Year	Public Universities	Private Universities	Public Institutes	Private Institutes
2010	403	57	543	96
2015	349	121	436	164
2020	326	164	380	204

**Table 2.** Top 10 Russian Universities in 2021 by QS World University Rankings

Rank	University Name	Location
81	Lomonosov Moscow State University	Moscow
211	Saint Petersburg State University	Saint Petersburg
241	Novosibirsk State University	Novosibirsk
302	Moscow Institute of Physics and Technology	Dolgoprudny
309	Tomsk State University	Tomsk
344	Moscow State Institute of International Relations	Moscow
361	Bauman Moscow State Technical University	Moscow

371	National Research Nuclear University MEPhI	Moscow
401	National University of Science and Technology MISiS	Moscow
501-510	Higher School of Economics - HSE	Moscow, Saint Petersburg

## 6. Internationalization of Higher Education in Russia

### 6.1 Mobility of Students and Faculty

Russia has made efforts to increase the mobility of students and faculty members in its higher education system. One of the key initiatives in this regard has been the implementation of the State Program for the Development of Education, which aims to encourage international cooperation and exchange of students and scholars between Russian universities and their foreign counterparts. Under this program, the Russian government has provided funding to support mobility of students and faculty members.

In addition, there are various scholarships and exchange programs that have been established to promote mobility of students and faculty members. For example, the Russian government offers the “Global Education” program, which provides scholarships for Russian students to study at leading universities abroad, as well as for international students to study at Russian universities. Similarly, the “MegaGrant” program provides funding for leading scientists from around the world to conduct research at Russian universities.

### 6.2 Internationalization of Curriculum

Russian universities have also been working to internationalize their curricula by offering courses in foreign languages and incorporating more international perspectives into their programs. This is seen as a way to better prepare students for the globalized job market and to promote cross-cultural understanding and cooperation.

### 6.3 Collaboration with International Partners

Russian universities have also been actively collaborating with their international counterparts in research and academic exchanges. For example, many universities have established joint research programs with foreign institutions, as well as student and faculty exchange programs. In addition, some universities have established branch campuses or joint degree programs with foreign universities.

Overall, the internationalization of higher education in Russia is seen as an important strategy for enhancing the quality and competitiveness of the country’s higher education system, as well as for promoting greater cross-cultural understanding and cooperation in the globalized world.

## 7. Conclusion

The Russian higher education system has undergone significant changes over the past few decades. The introduction of the Bologna Process has aligned Russian degrees with those of other European countries, promoting greater mobility of students and faculty. The emergence of private universities has led to increased competition and diversity within the system. However, declining state funding has posed financial challenges for many universities, and the level of student financial assistance provided by the government is relatively low. Research funding is also limited, leading many Russian academics to seek collaboration with international partners. The government has implemented systems of accreditation and quality assessment to ensure that universities and programs meet certain standards of quality. University rankings provide further information on the performance and reputation of different institutions.

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