

Russian Higher Education Under the War: Back toward Zero Agency

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More than two years have passed since February 2022 when Russia started a full-scale war of aggression against Ukraine. Immediately after the start of the invasion, the international academic community wondered what kind of reactions Russian universities would and should have. It was commonly expected that universities would condemn the war. However, while there were (and still are) many faculty and student voices against the war, at the level of organizations it never happened. On the contrary, it became clear that Russian universities are not independent organizations that build their own dialogue with the state. They are part of the state system, and under the new war conditions, fundamental changes are taking place in and around the system. The main forms these changes take are in terms of changing normative documents and rules, and changing the directions and volumes of state funding of education and science. What dynamics and changes do we see? We will discuss them based on [data by Ivan Sterligov \(2023\)](#).

Brain Drain

The education system is facing severe brain drain. It is still difficult to talk about precise empirical estimates, but the system has lost quite a few faculty and researchers in all disciplines and of all academic ranks, from people in the early stages of their academic careers to senior faculty who have left their privileged positions. Some of this brain drain is due to people intentionally wanting to leave (and, among other things, seeking academic employment abroad) because of disagreement with the country's actions and/or university policies, and some is due to layoffs or nonrenewal of contracts from the university side. There is much evidence on the political reasons for many of these layoff decisions. So-called "foreign agents" (a discriminatory and humiliating label imposed by the authorities on quite a few public intellectuals and academics) are not allowed to teach in educational institutions. Most of the international faculty and researchers from European countries and the United States left the country, too. This brain drain not only negatively impacts the quality of higher education and research but also its embeddedness in the international academic community.

Transformation of Curriculum

In spring 2022, Russia ceased to be a member of the Bologna system. This change means loss of transparency and comparability of educational programs, abandonment of uniform educational standards, and a significant reduction in broader educational opportunities for students and teachers.

There are changes in the content of education at all levels. Curricula of individual courses are being adjusted. Some topics and readings from social science and humanity

Abstract

This article briefly describes the changes that the Russian higher education system experiences in curriculum, research, and internationalization at universities in war time. The state's decisions mainly take form in terms of changing normative documents and rules, and changing the directions and volumes of state funding of education and science.

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courses are excluded from the programs. New courses related to the ideological training of students are being introduced. For example, as of the 2023-2024 academic year, the course “Fundamentals of Russian Statehood” is a compulsory part of undergraduate curricula in all higher education institutions in the country.

In addition to curricular changes, there are changes in the structure of training. Thus, the “4+2” structure is being revised. While the standard classical bachelor degree is still there, there are also plans to return to the system of general higher education (with four to six years of training, depending on the area) which existed in the Soviet period. Such an experiment is now underway in several pilot universities, and it will be further expanded. According to these plans, master programs will not remain available in all universities, and not for all disciplines.

Shifts in Research Agenda

Today, priority funding is given to research areas related to the development of the country’s socioeconomic system, strengthening of sovereignty/autonomy, and development of essential technologies. Science in Russia is mainly funded by the state, so to make changes in the general research agenda, it is enough to simply change the volume, distribution, and conditions of funding.

Social sciences in Russia are particularly under attack. Research on a whole range of topics falls into the category of undesirable, not to say forbidden, and falls under strict censorship. In some universities, even information about faculty publications on some topics is being removed from universities’ official web pages.

Back to Isolation?

Opportunities for researchers who want to remain part of global science are narrowing. Not only because of rapidly growing censorship, but also because of the expanding isolation coming from within the country and from the global academic community. Since the start of the full-scale war, there has been a massive breakdown in contacts. All this has contributed to a decline in international collaboration and its formal indicators. For example, the number of journal articles from Moscow State University coauthored with researchers from abroad decreased by 20 percent from 2021 to 2023, and from Saint Petersburg State University by 15 percent. While the number of copublications with China increased, the number of joint Nature Index publications between Russia- and US-based researchers dropped by 50 percent in the same period.

There is a shift away from publications in international peer-review journals indexed in Web of Science and Scopus as a core indicator for research evaluation at Russian universities. At the same time, a number of international journals actually pursue a discriminatory policy toward researchers with Russian affiliations, sometimes at the journal level, sometimes at the level of individual editors. As a result, for all reasons, the number of publications in international journals exhibits a noticeable downward trend. For example, the number of publications in Elsevier journals decreased by 16 percent from 2021 to 2023, and similar dynamics can be observed for other major publishers. In 2023, we see a 40 percent reduction in the number of publications in Nature Index in the country as a whole, compared to 2021. The only one that exhibits a 50 percent increase is the set of open access MDPI journals of rather controversial standing.

University Governance and Academic Freedom

Increasingly, individual organizations are being deprived of their agency. To assure loyalty, there was a wave of changes of university rectors, which was done top-down without the approval and sometimes against the faculty’s opinion.

The “5-100” excellence program ended in 2020. The former focus on international inclusion and the formation of several world-class universities is being replaced by a focus on coordination at the state level regarding the role of individual universities in addressing the country’s priorities. The new Priority 2030 program, which has replaced the “5-100” initiative, aims at totally different goals and objectives. As the program documents state, it is launched “to concentrate resources to ensure the contribution of Russian universities to the achievement of the national development goals of the Russian Federation for the period until 2030.” More than 100 universities are now participating in

it (compared to 21 participants in the “5-100” program), with smaller funding but much stricter control and constraints.

It is a common understanding that Russian universities have lost all of their academic freedoms. But the events of recent years show that in fact, there was never institutionally protected academic freedom in Russian higher education. There was no agreement between the state and universities that would have ensured this freedom, so everything that could have once been attributed to manifestations of freedom was a temporary lack of interest on the part of the state. The high degree of centralization and regulation by the state, the dominance of state funding, short faculty contracts (which can easily be terminated), the possibility of quickly changing the rules of allocation of funding for universities—all this leads to the fact that when the state’s priorities change, a new model of the higher education system takes shape very quickly. ▲

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