

ties. On the other hand, Japanese higher education institutions have never consolidated to protect their ownership of accreditation after it was introduced by the American forces in the mid-20th century.

The new accreditation system of April 2004 has only just begun being implemented; it will take more than six years until all institutions will be included in the present accreditation process. Nevertheless, this new initiative represents a truly critical change in quality assurance policy in Japanese higher education, as until 2004 Japan lacked any national tool to effectively demonstrate the quality of its higher education.

No accreditation system can be expected to adequately address quality assurance in university education without a strong commitment on the part of institutions based on a sense of ownership. As mentioned earlier, Japanese institutions do not yet perceive ownership of accreditation procedures, resulting in their lingering reluctance to be monitored or evaluated. If existing conditions in Japan continue, growing international and local market pressures are likely to have a far greater influence than the accreditation system itself for assuring and improving the higher education standards. ■

Will There Be Free Higher Education in Russia?

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The title of this article represents one of the key issues Russians need to resolve now, in the new stage of education reforms. According to the minister of education and science, education is never free; the only question is who will pay? Clearly, the government would prefer not to pay.

In December 2004, the Russian Ministry of Education and Science announced new priorities for educational development in Russia, which have been approved by the government and are expected to be further developed during 2005. These initiatives will involve significant changes at all levels of the existing education system. In higher education, a number of reforms are planned: a two-tier system (bachelor's and master's degrees), a new educational financing model, differentiation of higher education institutions and their legal status, national assessment of educational quality, among other features. These measures are expected to be implemented during the period from 2005 to 2008.

HIGHER EDUCATION FINANCING

While funding schemes are often not cited as the most important element of reform, in fact they do play a central role.

Reformers will link financing with the new two-tier system. Bachelor's and master's degrees were introduced in the 1990s, although only about one-tenth of graduates receive these degrees. The rest of the student population is enrolled in traditional five-year programs that lead to a specialist diploma. At present, bachelor's degree-level education is not perceived as *full* higher education, although the Russian government intends to make this degree the most standard one in the coming age of mass higher education. A pause between bachelor's and master's degrees might be introduced to allow individuals to gain professional experience and refine their educational road maps. Meanwhile, the traditional five-year system will be retained in certain fields.

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The financing reforms will involve a shifting of undergraduate funding to a voucher program based on individual government financial obligations (GIFO). Each financial award corresponds to the scores a high school graduate receives on the unified national examinations (EGE): the higher the scores the higher the financial support and, conversely, the lower the scores, the more a student must pay. After analyzing the results of a GIFO initiative at several institutions, most experts judged the program as a virtual failure, since universities face actual costs per student several times over the funding provided in the highest GIFO categories. In social terms, the link between GIFO and test scores limits the higher education access of many vulnerable socioeconomic groups in society with less opportunity for test preparation. (See another article by the author, "Bridging the Gap between Higher and Secondary Education in Russia," *IHE*, Spring 2000.) Nevertheless, countrywide implementation of GIFO is being planned.

At the master's degree level, the government will provide funding for training a limited number of students in only a few specialized fields. Other students will be expected to find support through corporate financing—which will be only sporadically available—or will have to pay the full tuition fees with their own (i.e., family) resources. However, even students who manage to obtain a degree at government expense, will not receive a free higher education. According to the ministry, they must either take jobs within their specialized fields for several years or otherwise reimburse the government for its funding.

Nevertheless, the ministry states that a transition toward total financing of higher education is not planned, and the government intends to fund 170 students per 10,000 population. However, the ministry does not explain how these numbers can be described as compatible with the current reforms—if, for example, only a small number of students get high enough scores on the national examinations to be able to earn a bach-

elor's degree for free. Also not mentioned is the master's degree level, which will predominantly constitute paid (rather than free) education. In fact, the free higher education sector has been steadily shrinking in recent years; currently, 44 percent of students study for free. The financing reforms may result in an even greater decline or the actual elimination of free higher education.

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The reformers assume that the new financing model will be more effective in a market economy and will help form a knowledge-based economy. In fact, however, the model merely demonstrates the gap between the education system and the real economy (i.e., the labor market). While the government recognizes that at present higher education does not meet the needs of the labor market, it looks solely within the education system for what causes the disconnection. Increasing numbers of government officials and educators concur that graduates who take jobs in the wrong fields or who go abroad should reimburse the government for the cost of their education. However, this viewpoint ignores the fact that the majority of graduates could not afford to accept jobs that do not cover the cost of living; and these jobs are those offered by the government. People who work in areas that do not correspond to their diplomas, or who represent "brain drain," include teachers, engineers, and scholars. While these professionals should work mostly in the public sector, the government has not turned these workplaces into attractive ones. Moreover, these higher education reforms are not focused at all on the necessity of improving educational quality, except formally. The reforms are unsupported by resources, and do not pay attention to issues of academic staff and their remuneration.

THE DIFFERENTIATION OF THE SYSTEM

The reforms also involve the differentiation of higher education institutions. About 20 institutions will obtain the status of national universities. These universities, which provide high-quality education and research, can expect to receive federal financial support. The destiny of the ordinary universities that comprise the rest of the system is unclear. Perhaps they will receive federal funding for undergraduate education. However, given the new financing model, these institutions will have to seek funding from regional budgets (which are sparse in most regions), try to merge with prominent institutions, or—catastrophically—cease to exist.

Another idea of the reformers that might be implemented is a division of higher education institutions into autonomous state nonprofit organizations and other autonomous establishments. The former will gain state financial support but will be constrained in their for-profit activity; the latter will not receive

public money and must raise funds independently. The current reforms offer the same organizational changes for the scientific research and development and health care sectors. While the ministry claims all the proposed measures will help to overcome "pseudoeducation," they may also work toward losing some important sectors of higher education.

CONCLUSION

Over recent years, changes within the education system, as well as in other spheres, are increasingly driven by factors linked to the economy and to government bureaucracy. The education community commands few ways of influencing reforms or even of participating in policy discussions. At the same time, the government is gradually distancing itself from education in terms of providing support, while not creating the social, economic, and political conditions for filling that niche. Besides, the Russian economy is a great distance from being a knowledge-based economy, and it is impossible to envision the real steps the government might take in the future to move the country in that direction. ■

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