

Challenges of international cooperation: reflections on the conference of the Russian Association of Higher Education Researchers

Pieter Dhondt

PhD, Senior Lecturer of History, University of Eastern Finland

Abstract: During the IV. Annual International Conference of the Russian Association of Higher Education Researchers, one particular concern still kept coming back to many of the (particularly Russian) participants: how to get into the top 100 in the global university rankings? An increasing internationalization of higher education is considered one of the conditions and means of reaching this goal. This article reflects upon some of the challenges that the Russian academic community is facing in order to fulfil this process of increasing international cooperation: the institutional background and large degree of uncertainty of the Russian system of higher education, the dominant academic culture among Russia's professorial class, a different approach towards historical research, the absolute dominance of the English language in the international academic world, and finally the absolute need to fine-tune the bibliometric systems in use in the different countries to one another.

Keywords: Higher education, internationalization, university rankings, academic culture

Introduction

As a member of the International Commission for the History of Universities, I was invited to attend the IV. Annual International Conference of the Russian Association of Higher Education Researchers, which was organized in September 2013 by the Higher School of Economics in Moscow. One of the explicit aims of the programme committee was to bridge the (persistent) gap between historians of education and educational researchers by choosing a theme that was attractive to both groups of scholars, "University traditions: a resource or a burden?". However, with the exception of one plenary session, cooperation

between the Russian Association of Higher Education Researchers and the International Commission for the History of Universities was realized mainly by giving the latter the opportunity to set up their own specialised symposium on "Universities' and professors' archives" within the larger conference setting. Unfortunately, in this way the programme committee inevitably undermined their own objective, at least to some extent, viz. "to focus on university traditions in order to promote a fruitful discussion on the current state of institutions of higher education".

As a result, a real rapprochement between university historians and higher education researchers was missed. In their presentations, the former group of scholars

perhaps focussed a little too much on the point of the history of education's mission in illuminating the past for its own sake, rather than becoming bogged down with concerns about the present. Yet there are certainly ways of enriching the history of education by engaging with the social sciences, whilst maintaining its integrity as a form of history and without meeting the functionalist demand to make history directly useful for contemporary policy (McCulloch 2012). In turn, the higher education researchers unfortunately also often confirmed a much held view amongst historians regarding the group's rhetorical (mis)use of history in order to enforce their own argument without actually knowing the true historical context, let alone taking into account insights of recent historical research. Again, the name of Wilhelm von Humboldt was bandied about without any kind of reserve (Rohstock 2012; Karlsruhn, Josephson & Östling 2014).

Importance of international networks

On the other hand, the conference was extremely successful in fulfilling one of its other ambitions: national and international networking. From the outset it was clear that this was one of those conferences in which the theme was perhaps an excuse to bring together scholars who are interested in a similar research area. Instead of focusing the attention on one (or a few) common research question(s), most of the participants presented the somewhat isolated results from their own particular field of expertise, sometimes more,

sometimes less connected to the general theme of the conference. Being inspired by individual presentations, as well as meeting colleagues and friends, was definitely more important than providing a common answer to the conference's questioning title. The almost cosy atmosphere within the luxury setting of a four star hotel in the centre of Moscow undoubtedly contributed to achieving these social functions (yet at the same time, a short stroll in the neighbourhood was enough to cause discomfort over the huge gap between rich and poor within this metropolis, but of course that is another issue).

During the conference, one particular concern still kept coming back to many of the (particularly Russian) participants: how to get into the top 100 in the global university rankings? Indeed, in 2012 president V. Putin had declared that Russia should have at least five universities within the top 100 by 2020 and, in order to achieve this goal the Russian government has earmarked 9 billion RUB (177 million EUR). *The Moscow Times* reported that some critics have viewed these rankings as unfair to Russia, as they "rely on a narrow Anglo-American model for university education and they reward research published in the English language". Nevertheless, the Kremlin and top Russian universities, including the highest-ranked Moscow State University, have been clear about their desire to compete in the global marketplace of ideas (Baty 2013). Currently, the Lomonosov Moscow State University is the only Russian institution included in the Times Higher Education World University Rankings, within the 226–250 bracket. In the QS World University Rankings, five Russian institutions appear in the top 400:

again Lomonosov Moscow State University (120), followed by St. Petersburg State University (240), Bauman Moscow State Technical University (334), Novosibirsk State University (352) and Moscow State Institute of International Relations (386).

According to many of the speakers at the conference, one of the conditions and means of reaching this goal of entering the world university rankings is an increasing internationalization of the higher education institutions, as well as increasing international cooperation of their staff, a process to which this conference clearly wanted to contribute, even though the international character was probably less pronounced than some of the participants had hoped for. A large majority (approximately 65%) came from Russia, as opposed to 35% from abroad.

How to improve higher education

Beginning with this consensus on the need to increase internationalization, the question of how to improve higher education, particularly in Russia, was the focal point of a large number of presentations and sessions (indeed, some of them at best started from a historical introduction in order to look to the future). Special attention was paid, for instance, to efficient and innovative approaches in teaching and learning, such as student-centred learning and the socio-personal development of students, experiments with self-evaluation and other current approaches to learning outcome assessments. Often, good practices from abroad were presented as possible

sources of inspiration, e.g. a special session was organized to explain how Hong Kong had managed to get a number of world class universities, and John Douglass, from the University of California, Berkeley, had given his lecture the provocative title “California master plan for higher education: the lessons for Russia” during a debating session on the Russian master plan for higher education. It is a pity that possible “lessons” from recent historical research on the transnational transfer of knowledge, concerning the continuous adaptation of characteristics from foreign models to the needs of the locality when copying them (e.g. Dhondt 2012), are seldom taken into account in these kinds of discussions concerning current educational systems being inspired by each other.

As became clear during the conference, the Russian academic community is facing a number of challenges in order to fulfil this process of increasing international cooperation. First, there is the institutional background of often highly specialized higher education institutions, generally resulting from legislation introduced during the Soviet era. According to Isak Froumin, professor at the Moscow Higher School of Economics, the integration of specific vocational research institutions, such as the Moscow Aviation Institute, the Moscow State University of Railway Engineering, or the Moscow Institute of Steel and Alloys, within the prevailing European or American system of higher education is far from evident. Moreover, many of the smaller public universities are working in an extremely difficult context, often fighting for their very existence, being the subject of merging operations, and having

to compete with an increasing number of private institutions. These circumstances, together with the growing pressure of commodification in general, create a large degree of uncertainty within the landscape of higher education.

However, without wanting to minimize the impact of these conditions, Russia is not alone in facing these problems, as most of the institutions of higher education of the rest of the world also face the very same dilemma (e.g. Simons, Lundahl & Serpieri 2013). Therefore, as was shown in the presentations of Maria Yudkevich, Elena Vishlenkova and Irina Saveleva (all of them attached to the Moscow Higher School of Economics), probably even more challenging is the dominant academic culture among Russia's professorial class. Some striking examples from their research based on large surveys among Russian academics in recent years are suffice in giving a glimpse of these challenges: Russia has experienced a decrease in the number of scientific publications in the last five years in absolute figures; whereas in Finland, for instance, approximately half of the academic staff are suffering from stress, yet at the same time enjoying great satisfaction from their work, their Russian colleagues on the other hand report low stress in combination with low satisfaction rates; income is markedly the primary reason in staying at a university, intellectual satisfaction dangling entirely at the very end (Yudkevich a.o. 2013; Vishlenkova & Saveleva 2013).

Collaboration of historians

Specifically in the field of history, international cooperation between Russian and, for instance, northern European scholars might also be hindered by a different approach towards historical research. Two somewhat caricaturally sketched traditions of writing history could easily be placed opposite to one another: on the one hand, among Russian historians, adherents of the nineteenth-century German tradition of collecting mere factual knowledge "without a connection to culture or life", as was criticized by Friedrich Nietzsche in his famous essay *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life* in 1874 (Nietzsche 1980), whilst on the other hand amongst (northern) European historians, followers of a more analytical approach, in which it is not so much the accumulation of knowledge at the centre, but rather the development of a specific argument.

Obviously, by placing it in this way it may sound extremely condemnatory and paternalistic, if not even neo-colonial. In practice however, it actually identifies two different approaches within history writing which have existed up to the present day, both in the East as well as in the West. And what is more, excessive examples can be found of both of them, for instance, representatives of the latter approach may be inclined to neglect particular necessary differentiations in order to enforce their argument. To a certain degree, the distinction between both historiographical traditions is comparable with two competing approaches in the writing of university history: on the one hand extremely detailed factual accounts of the university as an

institution and the developments in separate scientific disciplines, in several volumes and written collectively by a group of authors; on the other hand abridged “coffee table” synthesis’, written by one author, with a number of pictures and ignoring the unsavoury episodes in the institution’s past.

Nevertheless, the two competing approaches thus may sometimes impede smooth communication and collaboration between Russian and northern European historians, something that I also realized when visiting Arkady Melua in St. Petersburg on my way to Moscow. At first sight, it seemed that my lack of knowledge of Russian and his limited English skills formed the main stumbling blocks when enjoying an otherwise exceptionally warm welcome. And indeed, in itself the absolute dominance of the English language in the international academic world is certainly another challenge that the Russian academic community has to face on its way to internationalization. At the conference, the organizing committee had tried to address this difficulty by providing simultaneous interpretation, yet this could not fail to give the impression that many subtle nuances or more complicated insights were lost. On second thoughts however, I was forced to admit that the difficulties in communication with professor Melua also had partly their origin in our different view upon historical research. As being one of the uncontested specialists in the history of the Nobel family, he showed me his comprehensive bio-bibliographical database. Yet, up till now, this had largely resulted in the production of an enormous amount of extremely valuable biographical dictionaries, rather than it offering a concise

critical overview of the contribution of the Nobel family to the Russian economy and society.

Despite these major and minor challenges, the symposium of the *International Commission of the History of Universities* within the conference of the Russian Association of Higher Education Researchers did result in a common project, in the form of a special issue of the journal *History of Education & Children’s Literature*, devoted to the theme of the conference, “University Traditions: a Resource or a Burden?”. It reconfirms the often-heard concern of realizing common projects rather than really executing collaborative research. At the same time it brings us to a final challenge that I would like to indicate: the absolute need to fine-tune the bibliometric systems in use in the different countries to one another. In the Finnish JUFO-system, highly ranked Russian-language journals do not always receive the recognition they deserve. And directly with regard to the journal mentioned above, it was selected by the organizers of the historical sessions within the conference because of its high position within the (Anglo-)American Web of Science, yet it has only been added to the JUFO database recently, entering at level 1.

Final words

So to conclude, there is definitely still a long way to go before five Russian universities can be included in the top 100 of the global league tables by 2020. Personally I will certainly try to contribute what I can, however small it may be; not because I am an ardent supporter of this kind of world

university ranking, quite the contrary, but rather because I am looking forward to cooperating more intensively with those pleasant Russian colleagues, whom I got to know on the occasion of the conference, such as Elena Vishlenkova, Olog Morozov and of course Arkady Melua. Possible topics of cooperation could be the history of university jubilee celebrations, the contribution of the Nobel family in the field of (higher) education and, within the framework of one of my new research topics, the process of medicalization of infant welfare work and the education of health care providers in this field.

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