

Becoming a Researcher in Russia:

Professional Training, Self-Study and Amateur Attempts

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Context

Today, despite all efforts of the Russian Ministry of Education and Science as well as the Higher Attestation Commission, the number of applicants for post-graduate programmes in Russian higher schools does not seem to decrease. The scope of reasons for that includes reasons both respectful and disrespectful such as the need to avoid the Army service (for male applicants) or seeing the PhD degree as a necessary condition for their career growth or just guarantee of a higher salary or better employment. Yet every post-grad has to conduct a research, publish a number of research articles, write a dissertation and defend it publicly. And here raises the question of quality of Russian researches and dissertations much discussed in the Russian and foreign press (Clifford, 2010; Bykova et al., 2013).

One of the issues revealed by the research carried out in 2013-14 into the level and quality of preparation of Russian researchers-to-be for the researcher's roles (Burukina 2013b) was that there are deficiencies in researchers-to-be preparation and development in Russian higher schools, despite the declarations of the Russian Ministry of Education and Science and dubious attempts to provide high quality of researches.

A questionnaire respondent observed: "Professional training is not usually offered to new researchers at post-graduate schools and professional development has somehow elapsed from the higher school leaders' and programme developers' attention" – a statement reflecting partly the current situation with the preparation of researchers-to-be at Russian higher schools, inverted in the allegation of a foreign colleague stating that 'When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, science almost collapsed as well. <...> Although it is impossible to predict the future, the worst period for Russian science is probably over' (Graham, 2013).

This SRHE conference paper reports preliminary findings from a non-funded study devoted to the issue of Russian future researchers' professional training. The study was launched in September 2013 and carried out over 10 months, with the research objectives to identify major problems and lacunae in the contemporary programmes used for Russian researchers' preparation, examine the need for the introduction or improvement of such courses as research methodologies, professional English, translation for specific purposes, academic writing both in Russian and English, systems analysis, project management, and leadership, and, using benchmarking, identify examples of good practice, as well as all possible defects and shortcomings. The survey used emailed questionnaires, which yielded 534 responses from researchers-to-be and their supervisors and follow-up interviews with 25 of the future researchers, and addressed the following research objectives:

1. What is the level and quality of preparation for the researcher's roles is available to Russian researchers-to-be?
2. What possible defects, lacunae and shortcomings can be identified in the post-graduate programmes and what are their possible (expected) consequences?
3. What improvements are to be made in the Russian post-graduate programmes to change the situation for the better?
4. What recommendations can be made for the Russian Ministry of Education and Science and Russian higher schools?

Researchers' professional preparedness

The expectations of young researchers seem to be quite clear in Western Universities, both from their supervisors and university management, and the researchers-to-be themselves (Székely, 2012; SARS, 2014). These expectations can be divided into conceptual, material, competence-based, and attitudinal (Burukina, 2013a). This paper's conceptual message is within the conceptual framework of both systemic and interdisciplinary approaches, recognizing that 'the future of research is increasingly interdisciplinary' (Lyall, Meagher, 2012), as 'a major advantage of interdisciplinary encounters is the opportunity they provide for open communication' (Bridle et al., 2013). Contradicting the general Russian academic community, the author believes that the future researchers' professional preparedness is not to be measured by the quality level of their dissertations, but by the researchers' keen interest in their objectives, their competence, ability and willingness to conduct minor or major researches in the present and in the future, as well as their strive for lifelong learning and constant self-development (Burukina, 2013a).

Outline of preliminary findings: There is a need for changes in Russian researchers' training and development

Responding to the question: *Do you understand what your higher school requires of you as a researcher-to-be?* 87% of the future researchers selected 'to write and defend the dissertation' and nearly 25% of their supervisors responded similarly to the question *Do you understand what your higher school requires of your supervised researcher-to-be?* Figure 1 illustrates the combined responses of the researchers-to-be and their supervisors to this questionnaire item, indicating the unanimity of the respondents.

Figure 1: Questionnaire responses (%) to the question: *Do you understand what your higher school requires of you as a researcher-to-be?*

Raising more concern is the 72% of the first year researchers-to-be and 39% of the second year researchers-to-be responses revealing that they feel inadequately prepared for their researcher roles and carrying their present researches, and almost a half (46%) answered negatively when asked if they feel adequately prepared for carrying future researches independently, with well over a third (35%) of their supervisors confirming their doubts (average data). Figures 2 and 3 show the questionnaire response data on the issues.

Figure 2: Questionnaire responses (%) to the question: *Do you feel in/adequately prepared for taking your researcher role and carrying your present research?*

Figure 2: Questionnaire responses (%) to the question: *Do you feel adequately prepared for carrying future researches independently?*

This was the qualitative research data gathered through open questions and comments in the emailed questionnaire and follow-up interviews, which aimed at identifying the deficiencies in the contemporary practice of training researchers-to-be and the extent of their readiness for their current and future researcher roles. The data have been analysed and is to be presented to the esteemed SRHE conference audience serving as the bases for recommendations of the necessary changes to be introduced to the current practice of future researchers' training at Russian higher schools, which can be quite useful for foreign universities, including British universities as they advocate the need for introducing courses of professional English, translation for specific purposes, academic writing both in Russian and English, systems analysis, project management, and leadership. Indeed, much has to be done to get back the previously enjoyed high level of university practice in training and developing future researchers in various sciences, with the researchers-to-be to feel confident in their new role bravely facing their new duties and responsibilities.

The new globalized environment imposes new terms of success. The frequent complaints from the questionnaire respondents and interviewees included that the scope of duties and expectations from the researchers-to-be were too vague and too unclear. This perception can be explained as a result of the lack of holism in the post-graduate programmes, as well as the temporary character and unprofessional attitude of researchers-to-be to their current status, which in most cases does not provide them with enough money to support their living today or any guarantees to provide their living in Russia in the future, with a happy exception of researchers-to-be based at National Research Universities, with the National Research University 'Higher School of Economics' in the first line. The evidence gathered through this research suggests that there is a strong need for improvements to be introduced to the current post-graduate programmes used at Russian higher schools. I believe that when striving for real development of the sciences in Russia, the Russian Ministry of Education and Science could consider the issue of introducing the above mentioned courses to the post-graduate programmes including the course of 'Leadership for personal, professional and career growth' or the universities could do this as their initiative.

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