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ESTABLISHING RUSSIA'S GLOBAL LEADERSHIP IN HIGHER EDUCATION: AN ANALYSIS OF BARRIERS AND INSTITUTIONAL DEVELOPMENT PATHWAYS

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Abstract. Despite having strong academic traditions, a developed higher education system, a network of research institutes, and prestigious universities, Russia has so far failed to take a strong position as a global leader in the field of international higher education. Compared to countries such as the USA, Great Britain, Germany, Canada, and Australia, Russian universities demonstrate significantly lower indicators in terms of the number of international students, the degree of internationalization of the educational environment, integration into global academic networks, and presence in international rankings. This study presents a critical analysis of the key factors hindering global competitiveness growth of Russian education. Based on a comparative analysis of the strategies implemented by China, Malaysia, and Poland, the following barriers are presented: a limited number of programs in English, insufficient adaptation of educational infrastructure to the needs of international students, bureaucratic and visa difficulties, instability of the economic environment, and weak international positioning. As a response, specific strategic initiatives are suggested: development of English-language and bilingual content, simplification and digitalization of visa and registration procedures, expansion of academic and inter-university partnerships, active participation in international exhibitions and forums, and implementation of scholarship and grant programs aimed at supporting talented students from abroad. Particular attention is paid to the need for state coordination of efforts to promote Russian education internationally. The results of the study may be useful for government agencies, university administrations, and the scientific community interested in developing an effective strategy for the internationalization of Russian higher education. *Authors' contribution.* Md Amirul Islam – development of a research concept aimed at the formulation of the factors and causes of the effective formation of Russia's global leadership in higher education; analysis of the strategic globalization of Russian and foreign universities, as well as barriers and opportunities of globalization; writing the article; N.S. Mushketova – substantiation of methodology and general scientific editing of the article; editing of the article according to journal requirements; generalization of research results and formulation of conclusions.

Key words: Russia, higher education, international students, globalization, education policy, nation branding, language barriers, economic incentives, visa policy, comparative analysis.

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ФОРМИРОВАНИЕ ГЛОБАЛЬНОГО ЛИДЕРСТВА РОССИИ В СФЕРЕ ВЫСШЕГО ОБРАЗОВАНИЯ: АНАЛИЗ БАРЬЕРОВ И ПУТИ ИНСТИТУЦИОНАЛЬНОГО РАЗВИТИЯ

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Аннотация. Несмотря на наличие устойчивых академических традиций, развитой системы высшего образования, сети научно-исследовательских институтов и престижных университетов, Россия до настоящего времени не смогла занять прочные позиции в качестве глобального лидера в сфере международного высшего образования. В сравнении с такими странами, как США, Великобритания, Германия, Канада и Австралия, российские вузы демонстрируют значительно более низкие показатели по количеству иностранных студентов, степени интернационализации образовательной среды, интеграции в глобальные академические сети и присутствию в международных рейтингах. Данное исследование представляет собой критический анализ ключевых факторов, сдерживающих рост глобальной конкурентоспособности российского образования. На основе сравнительного анализа стратегий, реализуемых Китаем, Малайзией и Польшей, выделяются такие барьеры, как ограниченное количество англоязычных программ, недостаточная адаптация образовательной инфраструктуры под нужды иностранных студентов, бюрократические и визовые сложности, нестабильность экономической среды и слабое международное позиционирование. В качестве ответных мер предлагаются конкретные стратегические инициативы: развитие англоязычного и билингвального контента, упрощение и цифровизация визовых и регистрационных процедур, расширение академических и межвузовских партнерств, активное участие в международных выставках и форумах, внедрение стипендиальных и грантовых программ, направленных на поддержку талантливых студентов из-за рубежа. Особое внимание уделяется необходимости государственной координации усилий по международному продвижению российского образования. Результаты исследования могут быть полезны для государственных органов, администраций университетов и научного сообщества, заинтересованных в формировании эффективной стратегии интернационализации российского высшего образования. *Вклад авторов.* М.А. Ислам – разработка концепции исследования, направленного на определение факторов и причин эффективного формирования глобального лидерства России в сфере высшего образования, проведение анализа стратегической глобализации российских и зарубежных вузов, а также барьеров и возможностей глобализации, написание текста статьи; Н.С. Мушкетова – обоснование методологии и общее научное редактирование текста статьи, оформление текста статьи по требованиям журнала, обобщение результатов исследования и формулировка выводов.

Ключевые слова: Россия, высшее образование, иностранные студенты, глобализация, образовательная политика, брендинг страны, языковые барьеры, экономические стимулы, визовая политика, сравнительный анализ.

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Introduction

Russia has a long-standing tradition of academic excellence, demonstrated by the achievements of globally recognized universities such as Lomonosov Moscow State University, Saint Petersburg State University, and numerous technical and specialized institutions. Historically, the Russian higher education system has contributed significantly to global scientific progress, particularly in the fields of physics, mathematics, engineering, and medicine. Despite

these achievements, Russia continues to face substantial challenges in establishing itself as a leading destination for international students, especially when compared to recognized leaders such as the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, and Australia.

Over the past few decades, globalization has transformed higher education into a highly competitive global marketplace. Universities around the world now actively compete for international students, fostering innovation, cultural exchange, and economic development. However, Russia's participation in

these processes and its competitive positioning remain underdeveloped and often underestimated. This gap suggests that the factors influencing international academic mobility extend far beyond academic reputation alone and encompass deeper systemic, structural, and reputational dimensions.

The primary aim of this research is to conduct a comprehensive analysis of the fundamental barriers preventing Russia from becoming a major global education hub and to propose strategic directions for enhancing the attractiveness of Russian universities on the international stage. Particular attention is given to issues such as linguistic accessibility, regulatory frameworks, economic viability, and international branding. To address these challenges, this study applies qualitative methodologies, including an extensive review of academic literature, an in-depth analysis of policy documents, and comparative case studies of countries that have successfully expanded their share in the global education market.

Understanding and overcoming these barriers will not only enhance Russia's attractiveness to international students but will also yield broader academic, cultural, and economic benefits. Consequently, this paper offers both a theoretical foundation and practical recommendations for policymakers, higher education leaders, and other stakeholders seeking to strengthen Russia's strategic position in the global higher education sector.

Literature review

The globalization of higher education has attracted growing scholarly attention, as increasing evidence points out the important role that international students play in national economic development, institutional prestige, and cultural exchange [Revyakina, 2019]. Altbach and Knight emphasize the centrality of linguistic accessibility, identifying English-medium instruction as a key factor in attracting international students. Their research highlights that universities in non-English-speaking countries that proactively develop English-taught programs (ETPs) gain substantial competitive advantages, as demonstrated by the experiences of Germany and China [Altbach, Knight, 2007].

Marginson further underscores the importance of institutional reputation and global ranking positions as determining factors influencing the international mobility of students [Marginson, 2010]. Universities that occupy higher places in global rankings gain additional visibility and recognition, thereby attracting a greater volume of international applications. Despite

the global renown of some Russian universities, such as Lomonosov Moscow State University and Saint Petersburg State University, Russia has not yet fully leveraged its academic reputation to attract substantial numbers of international students [Ligidov et al., 2014].

Language barriers remain a persistent challenge. Kravtsova, Kryachkov, and Kuznetsova argue that the predominance of Russian as the medium of instruction substantially narrows the pool of potential international applicants, many of whom seek English-language programs [Kravtsova et al., 2015]. In contrast, countries such as Germany, the Netherlands, and China have successfully expanded English-taught programs across a wide range of disciplines, significantly boosting their attractiveness to foreign students. Political and regulatory frameworks also play a critical role in shaping international student mobility.

Studies show that streamlined immigration policies, simplified visa procedures, and transparent administrative systems have been decisive factors behind the success of countries like Canada, Australia, and New Zealand in expanding their international student populations [Makhmutova, 2020; Voevodina, Tyurikov, 2021]. Conversely, cumbersome visa regulations and complex bureaucratic processes are consistently cited as significant deterrents for international students considering Russia [Belyaeva et al., 2022].

Economic factors further influence student mobility dynamics. Scholars have stressed the importance of affordable tuition fees, the availability of scholarships, and predictable living costs, particularly for students from low- and middle-income countries [Koksharov et al., 2021]. While Russian universities often offer comparatively low tuition fees, broader issues such as macroeconomic instability, currency volatility, and limited scholarship opportunities diminish Russia's appeal as a study destination [Antosik, Ivashina, 2021].

The international branding of national education systems is equally crucial. The success of countries like the United Kingdom, Australia, and Canada demonstrates the power of sustained global marketing campaigns and strategic branding efforts in positioning their higher education sectors internationally [Hung, Yen, 2022]. In contrast, Russia's relatively limited engagement in strategic international marketing has constrained the visibility and global recognition of its higher education system. Additionally, geopolitical tensions and prevailing international media narratives often negatively impact perceptions of Russian universities, overshadowing

their genuine academic strengths [Romanenko, Froumin, 2020].

Successful examples from Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom show that dedicated national agencies for education promotion – such as the British Council, DAAD (Germany), and Study Australia – have been instrumental in overcoming such perception barriers through coordinated campaigns highlighting educational quality, cultural vibrancy, and post-graduation employment opportunities [Del Rio Rajanti, 2024].

In summary, the literature reveals a complex interplay of linguistic, regulatory, economic, and branding factors that collectively shape international students' decision-making processes. The evidence points to the need for Russia to implement targeted reforms to enhance its international competitiveness and better align with the expectations of the global higher education market.

Analysis of existing barriers

Language barriers

The dominance of the Russian language as the primary medium of instruction presents a significant challenge to the internationalization of Russian higher education. Globally, international students overwhelmingly prefer studying in English due to its widespread use and relevance in global employment markets. However, in the majority of Russian universities, coursework remains exclusively in Russian, thereby drastically reducing the pool of potential applicants. Many prospective students either lack sufficient Russian language proficiency or prefer to pursue their education in English or other internationally dominant languages [Lobatyuk, Nam, 2022]. Although leading Russian universities have made some efforts to introduce English-medium programs, progress remains limited. Persistent issues include inconsistent program quality, insufficient English language proficiency among academic staff, weak development of English-language teaching materials, and inadequate institutional support for sustaining such programs [Kolova, Belkina, 2023]. Moreover, limited support structures for international students, particularly in terms of language preparation and academic adaptation, exacerbate the situation. Studies reveal that high-quality language support programs substantially improve foreign students' academic success, retention rates, and overall satisfaction, thereby enhancing the institution's global reputation over time [Masalimova et al., 2020].

Policy and regulatory constraints

Complex administrative procedures and stringent visa policies represent another formidable barrier to the internationalization of Russian higher education. Prospective international students frequently encounter complicated documentation requirements, lengthy processing times, and bureaucratic hurdles, which negatively affect Russia's attractiveness as a study destination [Shurukhina et al., 2021].

In contrast, countries such as Canada, Australia, and New Zealand have implemented simplified, transparent immigration mechanisms that significantly ease the admission and integration processes for international students. Research consistently finds a positive correlation between streamlined immigration policies and increased international student enrollments. For example, Canada's introduction of clear migration pathways and post-study work rights has been a critical factor in its rising global market share in higher education [Sharma, 2020].

Moreover, Russian universities often struggle with internal administrative inefficiencies, inconsistent application of immigration policies across institutions, unclear procedural guidance, and limited support services for navigating bureaucratic processes [Popova et al., 2020].

Challenges in international branding

Russia faces substantial difficulties in constructing a strong international education brand, directly impacting its ability to attract global talent. Although the country hosts several prestigious universities, their international visibility remains limited compared to institutions from countries like the United Kingdom, Australia, and Germany. These nations have invested heavily in strategic marketing campaigns and national branding initiatives to build a coherent and attractive global image of their education sectors [Timokhina, Koryagina, 2024].

Successful international branding requires coordinated efforts that highlight the strengths of national education systems, emphasize the quality of academic offerings, showcase cultural openness, and promote post-graduation employment opportunities. In contrast, Russia's engagement in international education marketing has been sporadic, fragmented, and underfunded, limiting the global reach of its higher education institutions [Crowley-Vigneau et al., 2023].

Additionally, geopolitical tensions and negative media portrayals often exacerbate unfavorable perceptions of Russia, overshadowing its genuine academic achievements and educational opportunities [Zhang et al., 2024]. Without proactive communication strategies that counterbalance these narratives, even high-quality programs may struggle to attract international applicants.

Examples from Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom demonstrate the effectiveness of establishing dedicated national agencies – such as the British Council and DAAD – to coordinate branding efforts, promote educational excellence, and strengthen international collaborations [Deredzai, Goronga, 2025].

Economic challenges

Economic factors play a decisive role in international students' decision-making processes regarding study destinations. Affordability, scholarship availability, and overall financial stability are critical considerations, particularly for students from low- and middle-income countries. While tuition fees at Russian universities are generally lower compared to Western institutions, several economic challenges undermine Russia's competitive position. Macroeconomic instability, currency fluctuations, and inflation risks contribute to an environment of financial uncertainty, making it difficult for international students to plan and budget their education in Russia [Yılmaz, Temizkan, 2022]. Additionally, the limited availability of scholarships and financial aid exacerbates access barriers, particularly for students from economically disadvantaged regions. In contrast, countries like Germany, Australia, and Canada have successfully deployed a wide range of scholarship programs, predictable tuition structures, and financial aid packages to attract and support international students. Furthermore, infrastructural challenges related to international payment systems, exchange rate volatility, and unclear tuition adjustment policies introduce further uncertainty for prospective students [Nefedova, 2021]. Collectively, these economic barriers discourage students who prioritize financial predictability and affordability in their decision-making. To address these challenges, Russia must implement a coherent financial strategy that includes expanding scholarship offerings, stabilizing tuition pricing policies, providing clearer financial information, and minimizing the impact of currency risks.

Comparative analysis

A comparative analysis of the successful internationalization strategies employed by countries such as China, Malaysia, and Poland provides valuable insights for Russia. These nations, despite facing structural and developmental challenges similar to those of Russia, have achieved notable progress in attracting international students through deliberate, multi-pronged policies.

China

China has demonstrated how strategic investment and policy coherence can rapidly transform a nation's standing in global higher education. Through the introduction of a wide range of English-medium programs, simplification of visa procedures, active state-led branding initiatives, and targeted scholarship schemes, China significantly expanded its international student population [Ma, Wright, 2023]. Chinese universities have also engaged in global partnerships, bolstering academic reputation and enhancing global reach. The country's milestone of hosting over half a million international students reflects the impact of a well-integrated internationalization strategy aligned with national development priorities.

Malaysia

Malaysia's case highlights the role of strategic branding, affordability, and immigration facilitation in boosting international student enrollment. Through initiatives like the "Malaysia, Truly Asia" campaign, the country effectively marketed itself as a multicultural, safe, and affordable destination [Ebrahimi, Yusoff, 2020]. Government-supported English-medium programs, moderate tuition fees, and streamlined visa policies made Malaysian universities highly attractive to international applicants, especially from other Asian and African nations. Moreover, the Malaysian government fostered collaboration between public universities and private institutions, creating a flexible and demand-driven higher education ecosystem tailored to global market needs.

Poland

Poland illustrates the rapid progress that can be achieved by emerging education markets through focused internationalization. Polish institutions expanded English-taught offerings, established transparent admission procedures, and developed

marketing strategies emphasizing cultural value and affordability [Sin, Antonowicz, Wiers-Jenssen, 2021]. Operating within the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), Poland leveraged Bologna Process reforms and Erasmus+ mobility programs to align with European standards and attract students from neighboring regions and beyond.

Comparative lessons for Russia

Synthesizing the above cases yields several transferable lessons:

– *Integrated strategy*: Success is achieved not by isolated reforms, but through concurrent advancements in curriculum, policy, finance, and branding.

– *Governmental leadership*: All three countries benefitted from strong state support that aligned university efforts with national internationalization agendas.

– *Dedicated branding and promotion agencies*: These were critical in developing a coherent global image and in engaging strategically with international markets.

– *Student-centered reforms*: Scholarships, flexible immigration, English programs, and integration support played vital roles in recruitment and retention.

If adapted appropriately to Russia's context, these strategies could significantly enhance the global appeal of Russian higher education.

Opportunities and recommendations

In order to overcome the identified barriers and enhance Russia's international competitiveness in the global higher education market, this study proposes a holistic and systemic reform agenda. Drawing from comparative insights and empirical findings, several strategic measures are outlined below.

Expansion and enhancement of English-medium programs

A critical priority is the substantial expansion and quality improvement of English-taught programs across a wide range of disciplines. Developing high-quality curricula delivered in English, supported by rigorous quality assurance mechanisms, will directly address linguistic accessibility challenges and significantly broaden Russia's potential applicant pool [Maximova, Toropova, 2021].

The experiences of the Netherlands and Germany highlight the transformative effect that a

robust portfolio of English-medium programs can have on international student recruitment. In the Russian context, this requires not only curriculum development but also significant investment in faculty training, English-language materials, and academic support systems for non-native speakers.

Simplification and digitalization of administrative and immigration procedures

Simplifying and digitalizing immigration and administrative processes is essential for improving the international student experience and removing systemic barriers to enrollment. Transparent, user-friendly visa procedures and standardized institutional practices can substantially enhance Russia's appeal [Vasilenko, Zotov, 2020]. Best practices from countries like Australia and Canada demonstrate the positive correlation between simplified immigration frameworks and increased foreign enrollment. Russia should adopt centralized digital platforms for visa processing and admissions and equip universities with the necessary capacity to support these services [Boucher, 2020].

Strategic development of a national education brand

To raise the global visibility of Russian higher education, it is essential to develop a strong, coordinated international brand. This entails establishing a centralized national agency tasked with the global promotion of Russian education, modeled after entities such as the British Council, DAAD, and Study Australia [Mukhametzyanova et al., 2020].

Branding efforts must emphasize Russia's strengths – including scientific excellence and cultural diversity – while also addressing geopolitical stereotypes. A combination of digital marketing, global education fairs, alumni engagement, and international academic partnerships will be crucial in reshaping global perceptions.

Strengthening financial incentives and stability

Russia should expand government and university-level scholarships, particularly for students from low- and middle-income countries. Moreover, it must establish predictable tuition frameworks, communicate financial information transparently, and develop mechanisms to buffer international students

from currency volatility [Egorov, Leshukov, Froumin, 2020].

These measures will boost affordability and trust – two critical decision factors for prospective students.

Enhancing institutional readiness and international collaboration

Universities must build their international capacity by creating dedicated offices for international affairs, improving onboarding and integration services, and training staff in intercultural communication. Further, expanding dual-degree programs, international research collaborations, and exchange agreements can increase global engagement and attract students from key outbound regions like Asia, Africa, and Latin America [Zhakubakinov et al., 2024].

Conclusion

This study has identified a set of critical barriers impeding Russia's emergence as a leading global player in international higher education. Chief among these are linguistic limitations, complex immigration and administrative procedures, economic uncertainties, and weak international branding. The scarcity of English-medium programs restricts access to a broader pool of international students, while bureaucratic hurdles and inflexible visa processes create substantial disincentives for prospective applicants. Economic volatility and limited financial support mechanisms further exacerbate these challenges, and the absence of a coordinated, strategic branding effort undermines the visibility and appeal of Russian universities in the global education market.

A comparative analysis of successful models from China, Malaysia, and Poland underscores the necessity of comprehensive, state-supported reforms. These countries have demonstrated that targeted investments in English-language education, streamlined immigration policies, robust international marketing campaigns, and extensive scholarship offerings can substantially enhance a nation's standing in the competitive global education arena. Their experiences highlight the importance of policy coherence, institutional readiness, student-centered support systems, and strategic international partnerships.

Building upon these insights, the study proposes a set of strategic priorities for Russia:

- the expansion and quality enhancement of English-medium academic programs;

- the simplification, standardization, and digitalization of immigration and administrative procedures;

- the establishment of a strong national agency dedicated to the global promotion of Russian higher education;

- the expansion of scholarship programs and the stabilization of tuition and financial support mechanisms;

- the strengthening of institutional capacities for international engagement and global collaboration.

The realization of these priorities requires a coordinated effort among governmental agencies, universities, and private stakeholders, underpinned by sustained political will and investment. Only through a systemic, long-term commitment to internationalization can Russia fully leverage its academic potential and reposition itself as a competitive force in the global education landscape.

In the broader perspective, achieving greater internationalization in higher education is not merely a matter of economic gains or prestige. It represents an opportunity for Russia to foster intercultural dialogue, strengthen its soft power, contribute to global knowledge production, and deepen its integration into the global academic community. By strategically addressing existing challenges and seizing emerging opportunities, Russia can significantly enhance its influence, reputation, and contributions within the global knowledge economy.

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