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THE IMPACT OF WORLD UNIVERSITY RANKINGS ON BRICS STUDENTS' CHOICES OF UNIVERSITIES (THE CASE OF THE URAL FEDERAL UNIVERSITY)²

World rankings affect universities' positions on the global education market. The survey (2017-2018, UrFU) of Chinese students (n = 20) and experts (n = 4) found that for students the quality of education and their parents' / friends' opinions were the key factors in their university choice. Experts believe, however, that the role of rankings will grow and that high ranking positions will be used by universities to attract investment and improve their status.
Keywords: university rankings, higher education, international students, BRICS.

Introduction

The globalized world in which individuals, groups, and communities exist and co-exist is now functioning and developing in the conditions of the post-colonial order; greater cross-border transparency; increased mobility of people and commodities; and new communicative practices. Thus, education is no longer seen just as a national product and an institution spreading a certain dominant ideology of state [1]. Education in general, including Russian higher education, is now turning into a transmitter of global culture as it acquires a wide range of ethno-national, communicative, informational, social, linguistic and other new characteristics.

The standing of Russian universities on the world education market has been increasingly influenced by ranking systems. In other words, both national systems of education and individual universities are getting more and more affected by cross-border comparisons with their national and international counterparts and with the 'common global standards variously defined' [2]. High positions in rankings allow universities to attract investors and human resources, which local communities can also benefit from. Thus, rankings are able to indirectly shape the image of the region where the university is located.

In 2017, the Russian government launched a program 'Development of the Export Potential of the Russian Education System' aimed at enhancing the competitiveness of Russian education on the global market. In accordance with the

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Название статьи: Влияние мировых рейтингов университетов на выбор вуза студентами из стран БРИКС.

Аннотация: Мировые рейтинги влияют на успех университетов на глобальном рынке образования. Данная статья опирается на результаты опроса (2017–2018, УрФУ) китайских студентов (n = 20) и экспертов (n = 4). Для студентов качество образования и рекомендации родителей / друзей являются ведущими мотивами выбора вуза. Однако, по оценкам экспертов, роль рейтингов будет повышаться, а лидерство в них становится инструментом привлечения инвестиций и укрепления статуса.

Ключевые слова: рейтинги университетов, высшее образование, иностранные студенты, БРИКС.

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project 'Development of Export Potential of the Russian System of Education' [3], the number of international students studying full-time at Russian institutions of secondary vocational and higher education should increase from 220,000 people in 2017 to 710,000 people by 2025. To reach this goal, Russia's Ministry of Science and Higher Education chose 39 universities to participate in this project with the Ural Federal University (UrFU) among them. UrFU's function within this project was primarily to coordinate the international consortium – BRICS Network University (since 2016).

The wide range of university ranking systems includes the Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU) or Shanghai Ranking (since 2003); the QS World University Rankings (since 2009); and the Times Higher Education World University Rankings (THE) (since 2003).

According to V.P. Rindova and her colleagues [4], rankings perform three important functions. Firstly, they are used as a source of information by prospective students and their parents. Rankings help to address information asymmetries between educational institutions and other stakeholders, assisting the latter in their choice of universities, programs and majors. This function is particularly important for research universities as a part of the ongoing trend of the continued and accelerated increase in the tuition fees that must be financed by students and / or families. Secondly, rankings can be used as 'comparative orderings', allowing the public and the media to compare universities' reputations and standings. Thirdly, they can work as 'means for surveillance and control', that is, they are used as key performance indicators by university management and by the government agencies to allocate the funding.

However, there is a hidden catch in world rankings, pointed out by Simon Marginson, the editor-in-chief of Australia-based journal *Higher Education*: 'in global competition the main attention falls not on the top 500 but on a much smaller network of elite higher education institutions. Arguably, the global system is dominated by the top 30–50 'Superleague' institutions, more than a half of which are located in the USA' [2. P. 4]. In Marginson's estimates, these Anglo-American universities in all likelihood will continue to 'exercise the cultural hegemony' in higher education in the years to come [2. P. 4].

If we look at the recent QS Ranking, we shall see that Moscow State University ranks 90th while the Ural Federal University 412th (the top ten positions are occupied by US and British universities). It should be noted that, apart from the QS World University Ranking, the QS system currently includes a range of other products: rankings by subject and five regional rankings for Asia, Latin America, Emerging Europe and Central Asia (EECA), Arab Region, and BRICS. Russian universities participate in the EECA and BRICS rankings. In the EECA ranking, Moscow State University occupies the first place and overall, there are three Russian universities in the top ten. As for the BRICS ranking, there is only one Russian university in the top ten with other leading positions occupied by Chinese universities. We believe that a more feasible solution for Russian higher education would be to focus on improving its position in BRICS university rankings.

Global rankings are based on the comparative analysis and assessment of certain performance indicators and are thus supposed to reflect the university's status and position on the international education market. For example, in the QS Rankings, a university's performance is gauged through academic peer endorsements, cita-

tions per paper and research papers per faculty, faculty / student ratio, proportion of international faculty / students, and so on.

Each of these criteria has a certain weight depending on the ranking system. For instance, the weight given to the proportion of international students in the QS ranking is only 5%. Despite this fact, we believe that an increase in the number of international students will improve the university's recognizability on the global education market due to these students' informal connections with their peers at home.

Materials and Methods

According to the Federal State Statistics Service [5], in the 2017/2018 academic year, international students accounted for 5.4% of the total number of students in Russia. As of 1 January 2018, in UrFU there were 25,823 students enrolled in full-time programs (Bachelor, Master, Specialist, PhD), 2,226 of whom were international students. 1.8% of international students in UrFU come from BRICS countries, mostly from China. As for the enrolment dynamics, since 2012, the number of students from BRICS countries has increased 12 times. It should be noted that as of 1 January 2018, the share of self-funded students from BRICS countries was 87%, which means that UrFU is able to attract international students and that the university's attempts to promote itself on the global education market have brought certain results. If we look at the BRICS Ranking, we can see that even though UrFU has not made it to the top ten, in this respect it is ahead of some of the leading universities (see Table).

QS indicators (BRICS Universities), 2019

Ranking position	Universities	Overall score	Academic reputation	Employer reputation	Faculty student ratio	Citations per faculty	International faculty	International students
1	Tsinghua University, China	87.2	97	99.4	91.5	77.4	60.6	29.2
2	Peking University, China	82.6	99	99.8	64	69.4	68.2	53.8
3	Fudan University, China	77.6	81.8	95.9	84.7	58.6	89.3	39.2
4	University of Science and Technology of China, China	60.8	53.7	35.9	74.2	98.4	15.9	5.9
5	Zhejiang University, China	67.5	65.6	85	60.9	69.2	86.9	45.1
6	Lomonosov Moscow State University, Russia	62.3	71.3	78.2	99.7	6.7	16.6	73.1
7	Shanghai Jiao Tong University, China	70.4	77.8	96.1	39.4	85	77.4	15.6
8	Indian Institute of Technology Bombay, India	48.2	52.5	72.9	43.3	54.1	4.4	1.8
9	Nanjing University, China	55	58.5	41.2	26.2	87.8	75.3	16.3
10	Indian Institute of Science, India	47.1	35	16.3	55.8	100	1.6	2
58	Ural Federal University, Russia	27.5	14.7	14.7	88.5	1.9	14.3	25.7

In terms of majors, most international students from BRICS countries have opted for language and literary studies (186 people); civil engineering and construction, 118; economics and management, 77; political and regional studies, 47.

The available statistical evidence points to the fact that social studies and humanities tend to be the top choices of students from BRICS countries. Therefore, it would be a viable and sound solution for UrFU to prioritize these programs for further promotion on foreign education markets. The share of Chinese students on the international education market is growing steadily: 'if we take into account such global trend as the increasing number of Asian students travelling abroad, this region holds the most potential as a source of potential applicants' [6. P. 162]. Students from China, the largest population of foreign students, reproduce the international student mobility trend that the Russian education system has inherited from the Soviet Union, in particular the prestige of education in technical professions and engineering among post-Communist countries. On the other hand, the Russian education system offers training of sufficient quality for acceptably low tuition fees. This cost and benefit balance makes it competitive on the international education market. Finally, Chinese diaspora and its business interests in Russia attract prospective students willing either to join their families, friends and partners in Russia or plan to do business with Russia after graduation.

Our study, conducted in 2017 and 2018, was aimed at analyzing the role of ranking systems in shaping universities' attractiveness to international students, and we applied methods of qualitative sociological research [7]. We conducted semi-structured interviews with twenty Chinese students ($n = 20$) enrolled at UrFU and with four university specialists ($n = 4$) from different services and departments that deal with UrFU's promotion on the global education market (Strategic Planning Department, Laboratory of Scientometrics, Department of International Education Programs, and the Department of Linguistics). We applied the principle of targeted sampling and selected Bachelor's students majoring in humanities and social studies (five were in their first year; six in the second year; five in the third year; and four in their fourth year). Overall, we surveyed 12 female and 8 male students. The mean age of our respondents was 24.5.

Results and discussion

We found that the university's ranking position played a certain role in the students' choice: *'...Myself I wouldn't check the university's ranking but my elder brother advised me...'* (male student, 23). As the study of J. Horstschräer [8] has shown, when a university goes up in rankings, so does the number of student applications. According to one of the experts, *'we started receiving foreigners who are oriented towards our university because we are in certain rankings and at least they see us and they are aware that the university is putting some effort into it'* (male expert, work experience 18 years).

One of the key questions widely discussed in literature on university rankings is that of the methodology behind the compilation of these rankings [9] or, as L. Wedlin from Upsala University puts it, 'a major part of the literature analyzing academic rankings has focused on the rankings as measurement practices and has been "orientated towards correcting the flaws identified in ranking systems"'. One of such 'flaws', which is subject to most criticism, is the rankings' attempt of 'quantifying the inherently qualitative judgements' [10. P. 66]. Speaking of the QS

Ranking, the UrFU specialists we interviewed characterized it as 'manageable', meaning that its results could be manipulated: *'There is fierce competition to rise up in the rankings, more specifically, the struggle for the voices of academic experts'* (female expert, work experience 8 years).

In this case, the 'manageability' of the QS ranking means that universities resort to informal practices in order to improve their status. Although getting ranked higher is treated by many universities as a good marketing strategy to enter various international commercial research projects, for some it becomes an end in itself.

The Chinese students we interviewed said that university rankings act as intermediaries between universities and prospective students because rankings give them and their parents the general idea as to which options to consider. However, as one of our respondents has pointed out, one has to be careful when dealing with rankings: *'...I believe that you should first look at several rankings...'* (female student, 25).

Nevertheless, talking about the prospects of UrFU being chosen by international students, the specialists have pointed out that the rankings have launched a 'reputation race' and that the significance of the university's status and reputation is likely to grow on the global education market. *'Rankings show universities' reputation, so students are likely to become more and more oriented towards using this information to make their choice'* (female expert, work experience 8 years). This indicator gains importance in the competitive conditions of the global education market. *'There are many reasons why Russian universities are not ready for competition: in particular, the fact that the country remained behind the "iron curtain" for almost seventy years and hardly participated in the global competition in the sphere of research and education'* [11. P. 84].

We believe, however, that the choice of an educational institution is determined by the overall prestige of Russian education drawing from the achievements of the Soviet period, when Soviet higher education, especially in engineering and natural sciences, was considered to be the best in the world and the USSR was among the top R&D-performing countries. In the late 1980s, Soviet R&D accounted for a quarter of all inventions in the world (in 1987, the USSR registered 83,700 patents, the USA, 82,900 patents, Japan, 62,400, Germany and the UK, 28,700 patents) [12].

As our interviews with Chinese students have shown, they are mostly guided by the opinions of their friends, relatives, and acquaintances rather than the university's position in the rankings: *'...my brother studies here, he's now in his fourth year, and he told me that it is a good university...'* (female student, 19).

Yet another factor in the choice of Chinese students is the quality of education. They believe in the quality of teaching at UrFU: *'...professors are very good here... sometimes I have difficulty in understanding what they are telling me and I get nervous, ask them to speak into the translator on my phone... and they do...'* (female student, 24).

Our study has also identified some problems faced by international students in Russian universities. First and foremost, these are the difficulties stemming from the way the process is organized. International students have to deal with the university's rigid bureaucratic structure: for instance, in order to obtain dormitory accommodation, they have to go through a lot of red tape, which may take the whole day: *'...it took me forever to get dorm accommodation...'* (male student, 22).

Experts maintain that *'...in solving their problems, students often resort to the help of their consulate: if at a certain point, a student did not get what they wanted, they are well aware of this option...'* (female expert, work experience 17 years). Such difficulties were discussed in another study conducted at the Ural Federal University in 2014–15 [13].

Among the other problems Chinese students mentioned was the lack of innovative technologies used at departments of humanities and social sciences. Students point out that lecturers prefer to adhere to traditional methods in delivering their lectures and conducting seminars, and this fact is confirmed by the lecturers themselves [14].

International students see higher education as a resource that enables them to achieve a higher social status and improve their social standing. In other words, education serves as a ladder of upward mobility and an important stage in their life trajectories. Almost all of our respondents are planning to return to China after graduating: *'...after I graduate, I'd like to go back to China. The knowledge of the Russian language will be useful in my career...'* (male student, 24). Experts also point out that *'the majority of students are planning to go home. Even if they consider finding a job in Russia, it will still be 'China outside of China', that is, a Chinese organization or company. Even if they aren't able to find a job in their fields, they will be teaching Russian as a foreign language'* (female expert, work experience 17 years).

It should be noted that, since 2015, QS has added one more product to their portfolio of rankings: QS Graduate Employability Rankings [15], which seek to compare alumni outcomes for different universities. Among Russian universities, the leader is Moscow State University, ranking 101–110th, while the Ural Federal University was not ranked at all.

The same year social networking site LinkedIn launched a project based on the analysis of career outcomes for alumni of different universities. This project was aimed at assisting high school graduates in their choice of institutions of higher education [16].

It should be noted that the practices of Russian higher education are dominated by the competency-based approach, which is a part of the national education system. Considering this model, V.S. Senashko and T.B. Mednikova point to the differences in the understanding and application of the competency-based approach in the Russian and American systems of education. It is emphasized that the competency-based approach in the USA *'usually gives an opportunity to convert the experience of an adult professional into a formal unit of measurement – in this case, a competency, which was created in the course of a certain practical activity'* [17. P. 43].

The competency-based approach considers the needs of employers even though these are only the employers operating on domestic markets. Non-Russian employers do not participate in the implementation of curricula and programs. Therefore, the education trajectory of international students in universities, academies and other institutions depends to a great extent on the characteristics of Russian markets and organizations.

Every fourth respondent said that they did not consider the situation on the job market as a factor in their choice of the university and major. For international students, it is important to obtain high quality education in a prestigious university. As

one of the experts contended, *'at our university, Chinese students major in construction and civil engineering. China is now engaged in active building. However, what has always seemed perplexing to me is the following: what can we offer these students if the rules, regulations and standards in their home country are totally different from ours, moreover, it is believed that their requirements are much more rigorous than ours. They can acquire a competency here, we can even talk of competency transfer. I understand this situation, but as for other majors... I don't know what they can get here as the competencies are different'* (female expert, work experience 17 years).

Even though university rankings have their own limitations in terms of the data they use and assessment criteria, they still manage to reflect the differences in the attractiveness of different national systems of education and the unequal distribution of international student flows among them [18].

Conclusion

Our investigation has led us to the following conclusions. A high position in rankings is now the main indicator of the university's competitiveness but also of the quality of the country's system of higher education. Universities thus use their progress in rankings to attract more funding from the government and other investors. The percentage of international students is one of the criteria that determine the ranking position of the university. Chinese students enrolled at UrFU do not consider rankings as a significant factor in their choice of education trajectories. The key factors in students' choice of a university are the need for high quality education and word of mouth endorsements from their parents and friends. Students are planning to return to China, believing that the Russian education will give them better prospects on the job market and become a strategic resource in their career advancement. Universities are now competing to rise up in the rankings, which at times tends to become an end in itself. In this case, rankings cease to reflect the real situation in education and satisfy the needs of all the major stakeholders in the sphere of education. We believe that, in the conditions of internationalization of education, it would be productive to encourage cooperation between universities, which would allow them to coordinate their efforts for the benefit of students and academics. Joint programs may prove to be an efficient way of developing the global market of higher education and stimulate healthy competition and solidarity practices. Russian universities that are aiming to enroll international students should introduce marketing strategies oriented at promoting themselves on Asian markets and should design special programs that would take into account both the needs of Asian students and their respective labour markets.

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Keywords: university rankings, higher education, international students, BRICS.

Responding to globalization, Russian universities become increasingly entangled in local, national, and international relations. World rankings, such as the Academic Ranking of World Universities, QS World University Rankings, and THE World University Rankings, lay emphasis on the status and prestige of universities as well as on the quality of education and research they provide. One of the key criteria in their assessment is the percentage of international students, which encourages universities to seek ways to attract more foreign students if they want to move up the rankings. The article discusses the case of the Ural Federal University (Yekaterinburg, Russia): in 2017–18, the authors surveyed undergraduate Chinese students (n = 20) and Russian experts specializing in the university's promotion on the global education market (n = 4). The survey results have shown that international students do not consider a university's position in rankings to be an important factor in the choice of an education trajectory and that they are much more oriented towards word of mouth recommendations

from their friends and relatives as well as the perceived quality of education. Education is generally seen as a ladder for upward social mobility and is expected to improve the students' career prospects in their home country. Experts believe, however, that, in the years to come, rankings will be playing an increasingly important role in students' choices. They also pointed out that universities resort to both formal and informal practices to rise up in the rankings. Progress in rankings may become an end in itself but can also serve as a part of a more general marketing strategy to attract investment and improve the university's standing on the educational market.

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