

HRK Survey 2016

Obstacles in the cooperation between German and Russian universities

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I. Introduction

Based on the results of the German-Russian Rectors' Meeting in Bonn on 6 October 2016, the German Rectors' Conference (HRK) carried out a survey on obstacles in German-Russian higher education cooperation among its member institutions in February and March 2016.

The survey comprised the composition of a questionnaire, the dissemination and subsequent collection of the questionnaire, the entry, editing and analysis of the data received.

Questionnaires were submitted to 50 selected German higher education institutions, mainly universities. The criteria of the selection were:

- a) Quantity of existing cooperation agreements with universities and other higher education institutions in Russian Federation (more than 10).
- b) Quality of existing cooperation activities (double degree programmes, research activities, joint doctoral education, special projects as e.g. Partnerships in German Language and Literature).

The questionnaire consisted of five chapters. Each chapter contained up to 13 items.

Three chapters referred to the main areas of cooperation:

1. Study and teaching
2. Young scientists and researchers
3. Research

In addition, the other two chapters referred to the basic conditions for cooperation:

4. Financing, organisation and management
5. Availability of information.

Persons answering the questionnaire were asked for each questionnaire to mark the following:

- The chapter does not apply to the respective collaboration.
- There are no noticeable obstacles in this chapter to report on.

or

- Yes, obstacles appeared in ... [one or more of the given items in the respective chapter]

In addition to the description of the obstacle it was asked about the handling of the obstacle.

At the end of each chapter the opportunity to present positive experiences in the cooperation which could be a model for other institutions was offered.

Finally, persons answering the questionnaire were given the possibility to indicate whether their answers may be used with or without mentioning their institution and whether it is convenient to contact them for additional information.

The addressed institutions were asked to deliver the questionnaire to departments and individual persons involved in the cooperation with Russian universities. It was explicitly allowed to submit more than one questionnaire from one institution back to the HRK.

II. Results

Until end of March the HRK received 70 questionnaires from 30 universities plus two questionnaires from two additional universities which were not included in the number of the initially selected institutions.

Overall the answers can be categorised as follows:

1. Answers from universities with a longstanding tradition of cooperation where the international offices have the role of a very experienced coordinator for all departments. In these institutions the offices coordinated the "answering" process of the questionnaire as well.
2. Answers from universities highly interested in cooperation with Russian partners where individual scientists and their departments are taking care of the contacts; in those institutions the scientists (professors) returned the questionnaire.
3. Answers from individual members of the institutions (only two).

A. General results

a) The majority of answers report that there are no noticeable obstacles in the cooperation between German and Russian universities.

The main result is a very positive picture of the existing cooperation.

b) Despite the general positive picture obstacles were described as well. These obstacles were partly solved and partly not.

c) Longstanding contacts and as result of this mutual understanding and a high degree of trust between acting persons are most frequently mentioned as a precondition for collaboration without obstacles respectively for managing sufficiently joint activities.

The survey shows that individual und confident partnerships exist in many cases.

Significant for this cooperation is a lack of language barriers, a better understanding of procedures and a sufficient knowledge about the higher education developments in both countries as well.

d) On the other hand, the positive situation mentioned above discloses specific weaknesses in other relations. If the partners do not know each other very well, the management of the cooperation and the dealing with obstacles are more difficult. In some cases negotiated or planned activities/tasks have been given up for this reason. In those cases, the German partners mainly complain about a lack of transparency of structures and legal procedures and they consider the necessary "time expenditure" for administrative matters to be too high.

e) In some cases, in several Russian institutions different ways of handling the same problems were identified.

f) The following obstacles were mentioned most frequently:

- different structures of degree programmes,
- different structures of doctoral training,

- lack of sufficient financial support,
- language barriers,
- bureaucratic/administrative procedures.

B. Results by survey's chapter

1. Study and teaching

The answers indicate structural differences between the degree programmes in Germany and in Russia. In Russia in general, degree programmes contain numerous separated subjects and lectures with examinations at the end of every semester. In Germany in general, degree programmes consist of modules. The examination of academic achievements is organised in various forms and in different times during the semester. The obstacles resulting from these differences concern the following matters.

Recognition of academic achievements

Several answers indicate Russian universities recognise the academic achievements of their students in Germany Only in exceptional cases. Problems appear even if the joint agreement on cooperation includes such a provision. As rule, the students have to pass all examinations stipulated for the respective semester by the home curriculum. Sometimes they are required to interrupt their stay in Germany for the examination period at home.

The proposed solution is based on experiences within the European programme Erasmus Mundus. Russian universities participating in Erasmus Mundus cooperation do have more experience with Learning Agreements which seem to be the best way to secure the recognition of academic achievements at a foreign institution.

In Germany, the recognition of the academic achievements German students have got from Russian universities is easier. A problem is the lack of information about the degree programmes' contents especially in English language. The German students have to "draft" their Learning Agreements before leaving for Russia and to finalise them after arriving at the host university.

The application of and the knowledge about the procedures existing within the European Higher Education Area at Russian universities have been assessed critically.

Recognition at Russian universities, additional remark

Some of the German universities reported that Russian universities use the list of foreign universities dedicated for nostrification of foreign diploma when they deal with the recognition of academic achievements and diploma of students and graduates who only wish to continue their education or scientific career.

Students and graduates from German universities which are not included in the list are facing more complicated procedures than those coming from institutions included in the list.

In Germany nostrification procedures are in general not applied any more except for the access to the labour market in very singular professions. Nostification does not concern the academic education and the work as a scientist or a teacher at universities in Germany.

Joint degree programmes, double degree programmes

In cases the Russian students write their final thesis in Germany it is not guaranteed that the Russian partner institution is going to issue a Russian diploma – even if this procedure is officially agreed upon.

Therefore - as current solution - the students write two final theses, one in Russian and one in German which are similar in contents, but not totally equal.

Students' exchange

Spending a study period in Germany is very popular among Russian students.

German students need motivation and incentives (summer schools, short stays etc.) to be attracted to studying in Russia.

2. Early-stage researchers (doctoral candidates - aspiranty)

The answers in this chapter indicate structural differences between Russia and Germany too.

Different structures of Doctoral Training

Some German universities report about different structures and different academic cultures of Doctoral Training. The Russian doctoral candidates have to follow a curriculum of four years' duration. This curriculum contains courses the doctoral candidates have to attend obligatory. Therefore they are hampered to join research activities and projects in Germany as e.g. joint international schools for their own doctoral candidates together with candidates from foreign partner universities. Some universities mention that this is not a singular problem in cooperation with Russian partners, but is relevant for the cooperation with other partners in Eastern Europe as well.

Recognition of German "Dr."

Some German universities report that the German Doctoral degree "Dr." is used to be not recognised in Russia at all. The reason mentioned is: The proceedings of VAK demand at least a translation of the Doctoral thesis into the Russian language.

One proposal for solution is to achieve an agreement that Doctoral theses in English language would be recognised without any additional translation into the Russian language.

Procedures - Co-tutelle

In general, the proceedings to achieve a Doctoral degree (kandidat nauk) in Russia are described as very hard and bureaucratic. Not known in Germany is the procedure of external "examination" and final decision taken by VAK, i.e. outside of the university.

German universities are very interested in doctoral candidates from Russia and highly value their commitments to the existing and to future joint activities. Therefore, an agreement about a Co-tutelle of doctoral candidates is mentioned as a favourite procedure for this group of persons. The different structures of the training as well as expected bureaucratic hurdles deter some German universities from starting serious negotiations about Co-tutelle.

Financing

There are some very positive reports about the DAAD Leonhard Euler Programme, exclusively developed for the German-Russian exchange of young researchers.

3. Joint research activities

Concerning joint research activities the answers concentrated on the following obstacles.

It is difficult to identify the right Russian scientist because the published scientific articles and results are mainly available only in Russian language.

To establish a joint research project time-consuming negotiations are necessary. During the negotiations and preparation of activities the financial responsibility is mainly with the German institution.

The procedures of financial management in both countries are different. There are different requirements on documents about the payments.

Concerning financial support, even joint research programmes of the German Science Foundation (DFG) and Russian organisations are not optimal agreed upon regarding procedures and scientific priorities.

4. Financing, organisation, management

Financing

It is no surprising result of the survey that lack of financing is hampering the collaboration. Quite often insufficient financial contribution from the Russian side was mentioned.

Even in jointly financed programmes agreed between the ministries the structures and scientific priorities are different, e.g. the duration of the support differs between Germany and Russia.

During the last two years, the weakness of the Russian currency led to insufficient financing of scholarships if they were partly paid in Rubel.

There are nearly unsolvable problems with the official money transfer in both directions, but as a matter of fact transfers to Russia seem to be not possible at all. Russian institutions and individuals need a special bank account for foreign currency (valuta) for financial transfers coming from Germany.

In general, Russian students have to establish proof about the financial amount necessary for their stay in Germany.

On the other hand, some answers indicate high budgets available for international cooperation and internationalisation in Russian universities. In addition, high commitment of Russian universities to international activities is indicated too.

Organisation and management

In some cases, overwhelming bureaucracy in both countries seems to prevent successful negotiations about cooperation because of the high requirement of time.

Some few answers mention problems within the visa regimes. In Germany, for Russian students it is difficult to prolong the validity of the visa over the usually issued period of half a year even if there is an official German scholarship granted for a longer period of time. In Russia, it is possible to prolong the validity of the visa, but the German students have to hand in the passport for some period of time.

Some reports complain difficulties in communication at the administrative level regarding the language. But this situation is going to improve.

5. Needs on information

In German universities, the survey shows a very different level of knowledge about the development of the higher education system in Russia. Some universities are well informed and are able to get the necessary information from official, semi-official and individual sources. Some universities do not know that there are websites available in German and English (e.g. DWIH and DAAD Moscow).

However, many made a certain request on:

- Information about current developments in Russia's higher education system.
- Information about Russian support programmes and individual scholarship schemes.

Description of courses

In some of the answers it was mentioned that at the Russian universities there is a serious lack of information about the offered courses available in English or in German. This is considered as very important information necessary to have before the stay of the German students in Russia.