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The BRICS educational space: value reference points and university rankings

The new international reality, which began to take shape at the end of the last millennium and has been gaining quite distinct outlines in recent years, suggests new challenges to the forms, tendency, and choice of participants in the dialogue of cultures and civilizations. Today, the world economy, trade, finance, and technology markets rapidly transform, and many stereotypes of international relations and intercultural interaction collapse. According to A. S. Zapesotsky's fair remark, "Under these conditions, Russia has to simultaneously solve a number of tasks. On the one hand, this is overcoming the crisis of cultural and civilizational identity, formation of its modern national idea, on the other hand, searching for its place in the new globalizing world. The acute issues arise: who should be integrated economically, culturally, and politically with and how to optimally define and realize its national interests?" (Zapesotsky, 2018: 7). These issues cannot but affect the field of education. Herewith, forming new educational space – the educational space of the BRICS countries with that membership, which it has been developing in the last period and with the prospect of its expansion with new members in the coming years – is possible.

The first steps towards formation of common educational space of the BRICS countries were taken over 10 years ago. In November 2013, at the meeting of the BRICS Ministers of Education in Paris, the idea of expediency of establishing BRICS Network University was first articulated, and two years later, in November 2015, the Ministers of Education and Science of the BRICS countries signed the Moscow Declaration on Collaboration, and the Memorandum of Understanding, which was key founding document of BRICS Network University (NuBRICS). In 2016, the founding conference of Network University was held at Ural Federal University, during which the general

principles of forming and functioning this international educational institution were discussed, main areas and programs of student training were outlined, and proposals for development prospects were put forward. Network University has united more than 50 universities of the participating countries. Six main areas of scientific research and training were identified: water resources and pollution neutralization; informatics and information security; the BRICS country-studies; ecology and climate change; economics; energy (see: <http://nu-brics.ru>).

Scientific and educational activities within BRICS Network University are coordinated by international thematic groups. Their task is determining the content of educational programs, coordinating procedures for recognizing outcomes of learning by participants of BRICS Network University, resolving issues of academic exchange, mobility, etc.

In accordance with the Memorandum of Understanding on establishment of BRICS Network University, main projects are joint educational programs at the master's and postgraduate levels, as well as short-term educational projects of various kinds, in particular, summer and winter schools, courses involving guest professors from partner universities, etc. (see: <http://nu-brics.ru/pages/projects/>).

Over the past ten years, the geopolitical situation in the world has changed significantly. Today, the BRICS, with its new members, claims not only the status of a financial and economic conglomerate, but also the status of a certain cultural and educational association, within which joint research and educational programs should be implemented, aimed not only at developing scientific knowledge in various fields, but also at training personnel of new generation capable of effective collaboration in various areas of the economic community.

Solution of this ambitious task is impossible without a detailed analysis of the scientific and educational potential of each of the participants in this collaboration, as well as intrinsic factors that can create insurmountable obstacles to international collaboration among the BRICS member states.

For understanding how to move forward and what obstacles may be encountered on the way of educational integration of the BRICS countries, it is expedient to refer to the experience of previous years and analyze some statistical data on joint research and educational activities of the universities from the BRICS member states. So, in the report to the BRICS Global University Summit, the number of scientific articles in SCOPUS published by researchers representing the BRICS countries in collaboration with each other for the period of 2012–2014 is given. The analysis of these data shows a very modest level of joint publication activity by researchers from BRICS universities. The share of articles published by Russian scientists together with researchers from the BRICS countries to the total number of Russian researchers' articles in the SCOPUS database slightly exceeds 1% with Brazil, 1% with India, 2.2% with China and 0.54% with South Africa (see: Alekseenko: 2017, 39). It can be assumed that after 2022 these figures will be even lower for the reason that in recent years the number of articles by Russian scientists in journals indexed in the SCOPUS database has significantly decreased. Herewith, as the author of the analytical article “BRICS Network University and its role in building new architecture of multilateral cooperation in the field of education and science” O. A. Alekseenko notes, “the share of joint publications of researchers from the BRICS countries with representatives of the United States and the European Union significantly exceeds similar indicators” (ibid.).

It is impossible not to agree with the author of this article that the main reasons constraining scientific and educational cooperation between the BRICS countries are linguistic and cultural factors: “1. The BRICS states belong to different civilizational areas, use different languages, which often are the main ones in the academic environment, scientific research and publications ... 2. The BRICS countries have their own academic traditions that differ from each other, and mobility of students, undergraduates, postgraduates and scientists is difficult due to geographical factors” (ibid.).

In other words, the eternal and natural barriers to international collaboration – the language barrier and traditions that form cultural identity – can still slow down implementation of the most ambitious international projects.

The author of the above analytical article noted that in international databases, joint scientific publications of the BRICS scientists with authors from the Western world are significantly more frequent. One of the reasons for this publication asymmetry is the requirement to publish scientific articles almost exclusively in English. Apparently, it is no coincidence that even within the BRICS, South Africa has the largest share of joint publications to the total number of publications indexed in the SCOPUS database, with India (3%), where, as in South Africa, English is the language of education and science.

When building projects in the BRICS international educational space, one should not forget that the language of training is one of the most important values of the education system. The question inevitably arises: what language should scientific and educational interaction be carried out within the BRICS – according to the usual model, i.e. in English, a non-native language for both teachers and trainees, or according to some other linguistic model? Should we continue travelling the path of least resistance in the new international educational space, organizing the BRICS education and scientific communication in English? Externally, the societies are ready for this decision: for a long time, at the secondary school level, the widespread study of English has become almost mandatory both in Russia and in other BRICS countries. In higher education, lecturing in English is also quite common practice in many non-English-speaking countries.

Such an apparently easiest linguistic solution to the problem of educational and scientific communication in the architecture of the BRICS educational space to be built today is unlikely to be consistent in both political and cognitive terms.

Wouldn't it be a mistake to turn a blind eye to the fact that the English language naturally supports the expansion of Western Anglo-Saxon culture, many values of which turn out to be unacceptable to the BRICS countries' cultures? Is the example of Iran, a new member of the BRICS, illustrative, which has banned teaching English in primary schools and gradually switches to multilingualism in teaching foreign languages in secondary schools, having realized that studying only English is nothing more than adjustment of the population to the different cultural code of the strange world striving to continue its dominance?

Is it worth neglecting the cognitive experience of the past years, which has proved that it is the native language that is the value allowing the deepest immersion in the object of cognition?

The history of education in our country shows that the forced focus on learning in a non-native language is inevitably replaced by education in the native language. In the middle of the 18th century, Russia integrated into the European educational space. When in Russia, the first Moscow Imperial University was founded, the German professors brought from Europe to Moscow the mandatory requirement for reading lectures in Latin, the European language of science, as "the foundation of all sciences". But already in the early years of the university, efficiency of lecturing in Latin was questioned. Lomonosov's follower, Nikolay Nikitich Popovsky, Professor at Moscow University and translator, stated in his introductory speech to his course of lectures, that when teaching philosophy, Latin is worthless to be used, because "there is no such thought that it would be impossible to be explained in Russian". It is important to note that it was said about philosophy as the basis of humanitarian knowledge. He also spoke about this at the meeting of the University Conference in 1758, where he did not receive the support of the professors (see: Russian Biographical Dictionary). But in 10 years, the issue of the education language was unequivocally resolved in favor of students' native

language, and at the insistence of the curator of Moscow University M. M. Kheraskov and by decree of the Empress, Russian professors began to lecture *in the language native for them and for students*, about which a note in the *Moskovskiye Vedomosti* newspaper has been preserved: “Since 1768, at Imperial Moscow University, for better dissemination of sciences in Russia, lectures given by natural Russians in the Russian language, at all three faculties, have begun...”

A century and a half later, in the Russian Biographical Dictionary, A. A. Polovtsov, Chairman of the Russian Historical Society, the author of the article dedicated to Popovsky, noted that the speech of Popovsky “is still not uninteresting because of its reasonable criticism of educational importance of so-called classical languages” (ibid.).

It is also interesting today, for comprehending advantages and disadvantages of using in international education English as the modern language of science and education.

Neglecting linguistic factors in education is extremely dangerous and irresponsible. For the purpose of achieving efficient university interaction within the emerging BRICS educational community, discussing the theme of linguistic coordination of educational and joint research processes seems extremely relevant.

Anglicization of educational and research communication within the BRICS can be countered by a different approach to become possible due to modern information and communication technologies.

This approach supposes students to learn educational and scientific information in their native language. Herewith, university teachers will also use their native language to convey information to the students. The core of this communicative model is translation. In this case, both student education and research activities can be carried out in the language of the country, in which the student or researcher is located.

This approach is not new at all: it was widely used in the Soviet Union for teaching foreign students. However, its efficiency was not great due to the shortage of qualified translators and high cost of using equipment to provide simultaneous translation, and consecutive translation was rather time-consuming.

Today, the very practice of teaching foreign students, who do not speak Russian well enough, clearly shows a possible way: students widely use electronic translation tools in the classroom, which makes it possible for them to obtain the necessary information in their native language. Further development of information technologies in the field of translation and speech recognition makes this way quite acceptable.

However, for achieving real efficiency, joint international and interlanguage “linguistic refinement” of educational materials by the BRICS countries’ educational community, linguists and specialists in other fields of science is required, with artificial intelligence capacity to be used, in order to minimize distortion and omission of information by automatic translation programs.

This approach would allow foreign students to receive more complete scientific information, compared to what they can get either through a foreign language, which is non-native for them and for an English teacher, or through insufficiently mastering the language of the host university. The translational learning model may increase attractiveness of the universities for international students within the BRICS common educational space, facilitate mobility of students and researchers, and create more comfortable linguistic conditions for absorbing scientific and educational information. All these will contribute to improving the BRICS universities’ status in international rankings, and may also form important criteria for developing new ranking methodologies, in particular, the planned BRICS Universities Ranking.

The initiative on creating the BRICS Universities Ranking, designed to increase recognition of the BRICS member states' universities in the global educational community, was expressed in July 2023 by the Ministry of Science and Higher Education of Russia at the meeting of the BRICS Ministers of Education in South Africa. This initiative was enshrined in the Declaration adopted on the results of the meeting, and further discussed and supported by the expert community during public discussion on the theme “Promotion of the Russian higher education system in the international space” in the Public Chamber, which gathered working groups of the Russian Union of Rectors, the Academy of Sciences, the Academy of Education, as well as public councils under relevant authorities and commissions of the Public Chamber. The BRICS University Ranking could become an alternative to existing international rankings and an important tool for positioning and promoting Russian education and science in the international arena. The idea of ranking universities in the BRICS countries has its objective reasons. Even before 2022, based on the analysis of global rankings, it was revealed that each of them has its own “priorities”: some countries are better positioned, while others are almost invisible. Until 2012–2014, international rankings did not even notice activities of “Phystech” (Moscow Institute of Physics and Technology), the leading Russian university for training specialists in the field of theoretical, experimental and applied physics, mathematics, informatics, chemistry, biology and other exact sciences.

Currently, the situation has worsened: Russia is “poorly visible” in all rankings, in spite of fairly good indicators. Most international rankings openly discriminate against Russian universities. There have been problems with counting Russian authors' citations by scientometric systems. In 2022, the international organization IREG Observatory engaged in formation of international ranking rules, suspended the membership of Russian universities.

Today, our country is in dire need of a national instrument for the global positioning of universities.

In February 2024, at the meeting of the Council for Science and Education with participation of the President of Russia, Academician Sadovnichy, Rector of Lomonosov Moscow State University, announced a new idea – to create a ranking for the BRICS countries. He proposed to develop the methodology for assessing universities, consider it at the Council of the Union of Rectors and present it in October 2024 at the BRICS Summit (see: the Interfax Agency’s news <https://www.interfax.ru/russia/945220>). The initiative was approved by the head of the Russian state, who said at the meeting of the Presidential Council for Science and Education: “As for the BRICS ranking, this is a very good proposal, we [Russia] chair the organization this year, discussing issues of our collaboration with colleagues. Really good idea. It needs to be developed at the working level” ([https://raex-rr.com/news/press-reliz/rating\\_brics\\_approve/?ysclid=ltk04ueplo484151369](https://raex-rr.com/news/press-reliz/rating_brics_approve/?ysclid=ltk04ueplo484151369)).

It is proposed to base the methodology of the new international university ranking on the criteria of the Three University Missions Ranking, which, along with education and science – values traditional for international rankings, for the first time includes a new criterion – interaction with society, thus evaluating all three key university’s missions (see: <https://mosiur.org>). “One of our proposals”, stated V. A. Sadovnichy, Rector of Lomonosov Moscow State University, at the meeting of the Council of the Russian Union of Rectors, “is creating the ranking of universities in the BRICS countries, based on the project “Three University Missions”.” (see: [https://vk.com/wall-78019879\\_42567?ysclid=ltjysou731286337423](https://vk.com/wall-78019879_42567?ysclid=ltjysou731286337423)). According to Sadovnichy, “since 2020, the Three University Missions Moscow International University Ranking has been the most representative in the world: 2,000 universities from 112 countries participate in it; it is based on objective indicators, and considers the particularity of Russia” (ibid.). The Three University Missions Moscow

International University Ranking turned out to be the only tool that makes it possible to assess the international competitive positions of all Russian universities, regardless of the political situation. There are 154 Russian universities represented in it. In total, the Three University Missions ranking family assesses 459 universities from 82 regions, i.e. virtually all current universities in Russia. The closest competitor – the British THE – ranks only 76 Russian universities and widely uses subjective survey estimates. The Shanghai Rating (ARWU), based on objective indicators, assesses only 9 Russian universities. The Three University Missions Ranking is the most objective one, assuming maximum of participants and minimum of subjectivity. The weight of subjective (expert) assessments is 0% (compare: THE – 33%, QS – 50%) and the weight of bibliometric indicators is 17% (compare: THE – 30%, QS – 20%, ARWU – 67%). The Three University Missions Ranking displays the country's real needs, and there has been no alternative to this ranking yet. Following the results of 2023, three Russian participants entered the top 100 of the global ranking: Lomonosov Moscow State University (17th place), St. Petersburg State University (39th place), and MIPT (43rd place).

A new criterion is proposed to assess the BRICS university scientists' publication activity, as well. Relevance of scientific papers should also be assessed given national needs of the countries participating in the ranking. As one of the sources for this assessment, the so-called "White List" – the list of the most authoritative scientific journals, which includes about 30 thousand Russian and international editions, used to assess Russian scientists' publication activity, – can be proposed.

Within the BRICS, Lomonosov Moscow State University suggests starting several pilot ranking projects. As one of these pilot projects, it is proposed to consider the Russian "BRICS University Ranking of the Three University Missions family". The University considers it advisable to recommend to the authorities, universities and non-governmental organizations

of the BRICS member states to focus on the global university rankings supported by the BRICS, and proposes to create within the BRICS a public advisory body (council) on academic leadership. The Council will be purposed at consolidating efforts on improving competitiveness (academic leadership) of universities and scientific organizations, and forming competition rules in the new international educational space of the BRICS countries.

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