

# Developing Competitive Capacity among Russian University Teachers by Upgrading Their Foreign Language Proficiency

## Desarrollo de la capacidad competitiva entre los docentes de la Universidad rusa mejorando su dominio del idioma extranjero

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#### ABSTRACT:

The main purpose of this study is to determine possible ways of developing competitive capacity among Russian university teachers by upgrading their foreign language proficiency. The relevance of the research study closely related to the issue of training highly qualified specialists has been analyzed in the present article, along with an overview of foreign economic concepts of global university competitiveness and key factors in their formation. The article presents the results of the expert assessment of university professor competitiveness constituents inferring the need to upgrade university professor foreign language proficiency. We propose a research and teaching staff foreign language proficiency program aiming at taking measures to upgrade foreign language proficiency among university research and teaching staff with a view to foster the internalization of higher education and to facilitate the integration of Russian universities

#### RESUMEN:

El propósito principal de este estudio es determinar las maneras posibles de desarrollar capacidad competitiva entre los profesores de la Universidad rusa mejorando su dominio del idioma extranjero. La relevancia del estudio de investigación estrechamente relacionado con la cuestión de la formación de especialistas altamente cualificados ha sido analizada en el presente artículo, junto con una visión general de los conceptos económicos extranjeros de la competitividad universitaria global y los factores clave en su formación. El artículo presenta los resultados de la evaluación experta de los componentes de la competitividad de los profesores universitarios que infieren la necesidad de mejorar el dominio del profesorado universitario en lenguas extranjeras. Proponemos un programa de investigación y capacitación de personal docente de lengua extranjera con el objetivo de adoptar medidas para mejorar la competencia lingüística extranjera entre

into the global research and education system.

**Keywords:** competitiveness, teaching staff, academic staff

la investigación universitaria y el personal docente con miras a fomentar la internalización de la educación superior y facilitar la integración de las universidades rusas en el sistema global de investigación y educación.

**Palabras clave:** competitividad, profesorado, personal académico

## 1. Introduction

The key advantage of any developed country is its human potential. Societies based on competition create conditions for the emergence of competitive individuals, which is a factor bringing considerable advantages to the development of all branches of national economy, science and culture.

The relevance of the present research study is determined, above all, by the need to better understand the competitive capacity among Russian university professors and key factors in its formation. Two circumstances underline this need.

First of all, the present-day stage of the global economy evolution is characterized by radical socio-economical transformations and a shift to a completely new stage of global economic system development having to do with the formation of knowledge economy which is illustrative of two opposite processes. On one hand, fundamental knowledge is concentrated, in limited quantities, in various research centers worldwide; on the other hand, applied research projects are gaining in popularity. Concentration of innovative research activities in the world's top universities radically changes the status of these institutions in the global education and high-technology production market turning them into key players in the global innovation network.

Second, a country's innovative development activation results in the development of highly competitive universities capable of accumulating and increasing their intellectual potential and of shaping national intellectual capital. Additionally, it fosters systematic implementation of education and science and a shift of technology to production and, on this basis, ensures the country's competitive advantages internationally.

Highly qualified teaching staff plays a major role at a time of society's transformation, characterizes considerable changes in all of its substructures and emergence of new socio-economic relationships. From the perspective of teaching psychology, the importance of teacher training originates from the possibility of influencing the students' development and formation based on professional competence, will and authority. This places heavy responsibility of the teacher.

As a matter of fact, practice shows that teachers face numerous work-related challenges. In our days, the teaching process is required to be based on the teacher/student interaction, which, in its turn, poses to the teacher the challenge of using new forms, methods and techniques aimed at activating students' cognitive activity. Every teacher now understands how important it is to develop and implement more sophisticated learning methodologies and technologies into training, thus improving the quality of education, activating students' cognitive activity, developing their mental capacities and shaping necessary competences among students.

These objectives require university professors not only to have specific natural abilities and talents and considerable mental, physical, emotional and time input, but also to be willing to self-improvement and professional self-development. Scholars in the world's most advanced countries are concerned about improving teacher training effectiveness. Scholars and teachers point out that, in recent years, higher education teaching staff have been showing signs of increasing professional deformations and occupational burnout which has a negative impact on student training (Mitina, 2002; Kozlova, 2007; Yusipova, 2008). Despite a rise in the complexity of the challenges facing higher education teachers and emergence of new work-related problems, teacher training research studies have not focused enough on issues related to improving teacher staff training.

Socio-economic features peculiar to teaching show that its rationale, on the whole, is different from that of other professions. Professional rationales dominating among higher education teachers are the inner impulses, of which the teacher is fully aware and which incite him or her to be more active professionally and more responsive to his or her professional duties.

This being said, professional teacher training is tasked with developing higher education teacher's personality in terms of creativity, self-fulfillment, self-improvement and professional self-development, meaning that the teacher's professional activities must be organized in such a way as to foster development not only among students, but also his or her own development. (Moskovsky, 2007)

Despite the fact that Russian scholarly publications (Shaymakova, 2009; Tuktarov 2006; Andreev 2004) on university competitiveness, in general, and teacher competitiveness, in particular, are widely available, their quantity is not sufficient in the context of globalization. In this regard, we consider it necessary to present a short overview of foreign economic concepts of international university competitiveness and key factors in their formation.

As of today, the following general development trends have emerged in competitive higher education institutions:

1. Global scope of activity and considerable influence on the social development.
2. Systematic integration of research and education activity.
3. In-depth regional and international cooperation.
4. Sorting out students and teaching staff and highly efficient teaching.
5. Participation in interdisciplinary research projects and PhD student training.
6. Different sources of funding.
7. Close coordination with business circles in terms of professional training.
8. Formation of up-to-date infrastructure of academic and innovative activity.
9. High quality of educational activities.
10. Increase in consulting services offered by teachers.

A high potential consisting in new knowledge generation, an efficient transfer of technology to economy, a wide array of fundamental and applied research projects on a new scientific and technological basis, advanced high quality training and retraining systems are the key to competitive success of higher education institutions on the global educational market. Research strategies and their successful implementation by the world's leading universities, including Harvard University, the University of Oxford, the University of Cambridge, have long become the foundation of their high competitive status on the international scene. Besides, all these universities ensure a high level of their "inner academic quality" (Lombardi, 2001) by welcoming the most productive professors and teachers in terms of research, which eventually results in positive structural socio-economic changes in their areas and countries.

This original concept of international university competitiveness developed around the idea of the so-called "quality engine" has been introduced by a group of American researchers headed by John V. Lombardi (University Organization, Governance, and Competitiveness). The proposed competitiveness model suggests that the university should constantly fill itself (or its inner "quality engine") with high quality fuel personified by people (teaching, administrative and academic staff and students) and by various resources (material, financial, informational, etc.) and that it should enrich and reproduce its university potential (ability to attract funding in the form of tuition fees and scholarships and to put research outcomes on a commercial basis through patents, licenses, royalties or government funding).

It follows from this model that universities can become highly competitive by ensuring a higher

level of “inner academic quality”, in particular, by attracting the most productive professors and teachers, which is one of the elements of a university’s so-called “academic nucleus” surrounded by an efficient “administrative shell” (Lombardi, n. d., pp. 7-8).

Philip G. Altbach points out specific key features of the international competitiveness of the world’s leading universities. He particularly focuses on the following research-related features:

- ground-breaking research projects carried out by the university, which are recognized by the international academic community, can be assessed and disseminated;
- first-class professors considered as the main link in the university research system;
- sufficient resources and favorable working conditions allowing the university to attract and keep the best professionals;
- academic freedom and atmosphere of intellectual excitement that must dominate in academia;
- transparent and efficient university management system, the university scholarly community’s control of academic life (internships and university enrollment procedures, curricula, qualifications and academic degrees award criteria, appointment of new professors, main research areas);
- good conditions for academic research, availability of state-of-the-art equipment, labs and libraries facilitating, on the whole, creative research and implementation of innovative teaching techniques. (Altbach 2003).

In his research on the dynamics of national and global competitiveness in higher education, the Australian researcher Simon Marginson observes that, given the increased competition on the global educational market, the universities’ competitive status is mainly determined by their high research productivity and their attractiveness for talented students (Marginson 2006).

Thus, a university’s research potential is its predominant feature representative of its competitive status on the global educational market, the basis of its international reputation and a guarantee of the countries’ increase in their overall innovative potential. In Marginson’s point of view, the presence of universities that are highly competitive on a global scale shows the country’s high scientific and technological potential on the whole and its sustainable capacity-building in the future. (Marginson, 2004)

Lloyd Armstrong devoted much attention to universities’ competitive advantages in the context of a new global environment and focused primarily on the development of the following directions: close ties between academic research and teaching; institutional perfection; organizational changes and distance education. Universities’ inner resources must be directed, first of all, at stimulating new areas of research and teachers’ creativity (Lloyd Armstrong 2002).

Hugo Hortas dedicated a number of his research studies to highly competitive universities at the global and national scale, focusing on the following key features that ensure a university’s high competitiveness: first, their belonging to the group of countries boasting the world’s top academic systems; second, a great number of necessary resources and an excellent international reputation as compared to other educational institutions; third, previous successful experience in international educational and research activities (Horta Hugo 2009, pp. 388-390), which is impossible without professors’ and teachers’ fluency in foreign languages.

Hortas draws special attention to the supporting role of the state to raise the international competitive status of higher education institutions and to enhance their internationalization level (in particular, by bringing professors from abroad) and stresses that government funding and support are crucially important if a country wants its best national universities to be highly competitive globally.

A rational combination of the “key factors” of international competitiveness allows the world’s top universities to take leading positions in various spheres of activity, such as training of highly

competitive students resulting from the combination of concentration of talented students and sufficient funding; high research effectiveness achieved by combining concentration of talented students and effective university management; dissemination of good ideas and technologies acquired by combining sufficient funding and effective management. The above-mentioned results produced from the combination of “key factors” represent some inherently synergetic effects brought about from interaction of specific components of the university’s complex inner system. It is its ability to maximize these components that is the key prerequisite and the pledge of a university’s success on the global educational market.

A university’s intellectual capital represented by its academic and teaching staff is therefore a major factor in the success of a university in its economic competition for leadership in global markets.

Proficiency in foreign languages is one of the main conditions for increasing the competitiveness of a teacher as well as of a university, on the whole, and for integrating an educational institution into the world’s scientific, educational and cultural community.

## 2. Research Methodology

Table 1 shows the main academic and teaching staff competitiveness components and their specifications, based on our analysis of studies conducted by Russian researchers (Bezudnaya, 2009; Vorobyeva 2004).

**Table 1**  
Main academic and teaching staff competitiveness components and their specifications

No.	Competitiveness components	Specifications of competitiveness components
1	Professionalism	Knowledge and skills in the subject area; high proficiency in tackling professional tasks; active thinking skills; practical experience; high intellectual potential
2	Teaching competence	Advanced psychological and pedagogic knowledge; proficiency in main didactic teaching methods
3	Academic achievements	Academic degree; academic significance; intense research activity; scientific publications, etc.
4	Intellectuality, Culture	Inner culture; independent thinking; rules-based behavior; speaking and communication skills
5	Interpersonal skills	Sociability; contact skills; teamwork skills
6	Creativity	High level of creative initiative; professional problem solving skills; innovation
7	Innovation capabilities	Responsiveness to innovations; use of innovative teaching methods, etc.
8	Foreign language proficiency	Fluency in a foreign language
9	Age and medical condition	mental and physical health level

10	Professional responsibility and self-discipline	Sense of responsibility in regard of the quality of teaching; time management skills; effective goal setting
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Teaching staff competitiveness was calculated in accordance with the formula set out below:

N 10

$$K_n = \frac{\sum_{I=1}^n \sum_{J=1}^{10} (\alpha_j \times \beta_{ij})}{5n}$$

where  $K_n$  is the level of competitiveness;  $i = 1, 2, \dots, n$  is the number of experts;  $j = 1, 2, \dots, 10$  is competitiveness component number;  $\alpha$  is significance of  $i$ -th competitiveness component;  $\beta$  is assessment of  $j$ -th competitiveness component by the  $i$ -th expert on a five-point scale;  $5n$  is the greatest possible number of points that the teacher to be assessed can obtain (5 points multiplied by  $n$  experts).

An expert group of 15 students participated in the research study and carried out an expert evaluation of the competitiveness components of 10 teachers.

### 3. Research Outcomes

Table 2 shows the assessment results of the relevance of teacher competitiveness components (average value).

**Table 2**  
Assessment results of the relevance of competitiveness components (average value among teachers)

No.	Competitiveness components	Component value
1	Professionalism	0,21
2	Pedagogic competence	0,15
3	Academic achievements	0,12
4	Intellectuality, culture	0,08
5	Interpersonal skills	0,06
6	Creativity	0,05
7	Innovation capabilities	0,10
8	Foreign language proficiency	0,03
9	Age and medical condition	0,09
10	Professional responsibility and self-discipline	0,11
Total:		1

The research outcomes show that, on the whole, the assessed teachers have sufficiently high competitiveness, but they need to improve their foreign language skills to further enhance their competitiveness.

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## 4. Results and Discussion

The current level of university teachers' English proficiency complicates and slows down the process of the Russian universities' participation in international programs and is insufficient to create an image of the Russian universities as higher education institutions with high rates of international activity. It is possible to improve the current situation by shaping the policy of the English language priority as a means of the Russian universities' efficient international activity.

In relation to the above, we have developed a Teaching Staff Foreign Language Enhancement Program (henceforth, the Program).

The Program is being implemented as a means to address the following needs:

- practical: to develop general and profession-oriented communicative English language skills (linguistic, socio-linguistic and pragmatic) among university teaching staff to facilitate their communication in the academic and professional environment;
- educational: to develop general competences (declarative knowledge and skills) among university teaching staff fostering the formation of self-evaluation and self-teaching skills in the academic and professional environment;
- cognitive: to involve university teaching staff to the English-speaking activities boosting a full specter of their cognitive abilities;
- challenging: to develop university teaching staff's confidence in using English as a means of communications and to shape their positive attitude towards learning and using English in learning, research and in international exchanges.

Requirements for the English language competence should become a new criterion of the university personnel policy giving priority to employees capable of speaking fluently in foreign languages.

Developing and increasing foreign language proficiency for professional purposes is dominant in university teaching staff advanced training.

Not only candidates for positions of Assistant and Associate Professor, but also other university employees applying for participation in international mobility programs should pass compulsory examinations (for example, IELTS and TOEFL).

It would be appropriate, as part of the development of university teaching staff's academic potential, to offer them professional English interdepartmental seminars; to activate university teaching staff's participation in scientific and practical activities aimed at improving the English language skills (resume, cover letter and project participation writing master classes; academic article and abstract translation workshops, etc.).

All university departments should become more active in publishing scholarly articles in English, updating the English version of the university's official website, compiling professional thesauri and terminological dictionaries in foreign languages, among other things.

A more in-depth study of foreign languages among academicians should also include academic readings in English and a permanent seminar on the use of the English language web resources, along with the creation of the English language web resources library, while enriching the repository with professional publications written in English (Table 3).

**Table 3**

A Plan of Action to Implement the Program

Events	Time frames	Responsible
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Classes focused on improving the English language skills among university teachers, at the Foreign Language Centre	On a regular basis	Department of the English Language
Preparation for the international language exam for university teachers	Annually	Department of the English Language
Interdepartmental seminars on English for professional purposes	On a regular basis	Heads of department, Department of the English Language
Resume, cover letter and project participation writing master classes	Once per semester	Department of the English Language
Academic article and abstract translation workshops	Once per semester	Department of the English Language
Seminars on the use of the English language web resources	On a regular basis	Young Scholars Committee
Creation of the English language web resources library; updating of the repository with professional publications in English.	On a regular basis	Research library
English Speaking / Video Club Meetings	On a regular basis	Department of the English Language
English Speaking Day at the University	On Tuesdays	University teaching staff
University-wide competition on the best English language textbook, lecture notes or workshop	Annually	University teaching staff
English Speaking Day	On Tuesdays	University teaching staff

## 5. Conclusion

Changes in strategic objectives of education and in learning technologies, along with the rapid pace of computerization, set new challenges for university teachers and demands from them continuous professional self-improvement and, from the university authorities, the creation of favorable conditions for each teacher's self-fulfillment and self-assertion.

The suggested Teaching Staff Foreign Language Enhancement Program aims to solve the following tasks: to enhance a university's image in international education and academia; to show an increase in a university's international activities; to expand a university's presence in providing educational services in terms of the English language training programs and distance courses; to improve university's ratings nationwide and globally.

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