

# Scientific Degrees as a Status Characteristic of Russian University Teachers

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## Abstract

This paper gives an assessment of the social and motivational value of scientific degrees of Russian university teachers. The author analyzes the historical experience and current trends in the transformation of the system of degrees. The paper shows the dynamics and structural characteristics of teachers with different professional and qualification status in the context of modernization of higher education. An assessment of salary level according to scientific degree is given. Based on the results of a sociological survey, behavior strategies in respect of earning a degree of candidate and doctor of sciences are identified. The principal status advantages of degree holders are described. Reasons for the discredit of the Russian system of scientific degrees are identified.

**Keywords:** university teachers (professors), scientific degree, social status, modernization of higher education

## 1. Introduction

Modernization of the system of higher education is a priority direction of the reforms currently under way in Russia. Today, the reasons for many negative trends typical for the Russian higher education, specifically, significant deterioration in the quality of the teaching profession, are widely discussed.

In search of ways out of the critical situation in which the higher education now finds itself, Russian and foreign researchers diligently study the mechanisms of adaptation of higher-education teachers to the new socio-economic environment (Gokhberg et al., 2011; Ilyina 2011; El-Khawas, 2010; Ouardighi et al., 2013). Downward dynamics of the level and quality of life of university teachers is shown, the situation and trends in the professional labor market are analyzed (Zoghi, 2003; Stocum, 2013). It is demonstrated that the lack of an efficient system of motivation and encouragement of innovative scientific activity becomes a serious problem (Grunina et al., 2010; Allain, 2010; Rumbley et al., 2010). Some experts also emphasize the uncertain social status of a teacher in the context of modernization of the educational system (Albu & Cojocariu, 2012; Musselin, 2013; Renzulli et al., 2013).

Analyzing status characteristics of Russian university professors, researchers pay special attention to the system of scientific degrees (Ilyina, 2012; Laptev et al., 2013). The significance of degrees for the Russian educational and scientific community is tremendous, but their motivational and status importance for university teachers has actually remained undisclosed.

In Russia, a scientific degree is a level in the qualification system that allows ranking the academic and teaching staff. It is a stage in the academic career fixing the personal achievements of a researcher. A degree may also be viewed as a professional and qualification characteristic reflecting the ability to solve research problems of a particular level of complexity.

Presently, there are two degrees in Russia:

- Candidate of sciences (primary level),
- Doctor of sciences (higher level).

Degrees are awarded following the defense of a thesis and are evidenced by a diploma of a candidate or doctor of sciences. The doctor's degree may be awarded only to holders of the candidate's degree.

For most higher-education teachers, a degree is a fundamental goal the way to which abounds with numerous obstacles of not only scientific, but also organizational, administrative and economic nature. A degree of

candidate, and especially of doctor of sciences, enables to rise to a higher level in the hierarchy system of the educational community. Therefore, it is the willingness to have a higher professional and qualification status that is the major motivator and strategic guideline for thousands of Russian teachers engaged in research.

## 2. Methods

The need for monitoring and comprehensive analysis of the processes taking place in the Russian higher education at the present stage explains an intensive use of a system of general scientific and specific research methods. Specifically, general scientific methods, such as structural and factor analysis, synthesis, system approach, were used. Also, methods of correlation, typological, historico-genetic comparative micro- and macroeconomic analysis were applied (Kaurova et al., 2014).

The empirical base of the research rests on the integrated use of sociological and economico-statistical methods. To identify the most significant structural and qualitative characteristics of higher-education teaching personnel, the official statistics data provided by the Federal State Statistics Service of Russia (Rosstat) are used, as well as the data obtained in the process of monitoring academic and educational processes conducted by the National Research University “Higher School of Economics” (Indicators of Science, 2014; Education in Figures, 2013). The empirical base is also formed by the results of sociological surveys and interviews with teachers of the Faculty of Social Insurance, Labor Economics and Sociology of the Russian State Social University (RSSU) conducted in 2009-2012 under the project “The Development of Theoretical and Practical Principles of Motivation of and Incentives for Higher-Education Teaching Personnel in the Current Context”.

Regulatory legal documents of the Ministry of Education and Science of the Russian Federation (the Concept) are also used in the paper.

## 3. Findings

### 3.1 Transformation of the System of Scientific Degrees in Russia

Scientific degrees in Russia have a long history. Originally, to complete education and gain a degree, Russian scientists went to Europe. In 1754, the Medical Collegium for the first time got the right to award degrees in medicine; in 1791, it was joined by the Moscow University. In 1810, the imperial decree “Regulations on Awarding Academic Degrees” introduced degrees of candidate, master and doctor of sciences and regulated the procedure for their award. To earn a master’s and doctor’s degree, a dissertation was required; the degree of candidate of sciences was awarded for successful graduation from university. In 1884, the candidate’s degree was abolished and the “master-doctor” system, like in other European countries, was approved. The October Revolution (1917) triggered radical changes affecting the educational and scientific community in Russia. In 1917, master’s and doctor’s degrees were abolished. However, in 1934, degrees of candidate and doctor of sciences were reintroduced (The degree of master of sciences was revived in Russia in 1993, but as an academic, rather than scientific degree).

Specialists are of the opinion that the USSR adopted the two-level German academic model (Future of Higher Education, 2013). The first level—candidate of sciences—is equivalent to the German *Doctor* and qualifies for position of ‘docent’ (or academic rank ‘assistant professor’). The second level—doctor of sciences—corresponds to German *Habilitation* and qualifies for professorship or the rank of full professor.

Presently, the system of degrees and prospects of its transformation are intensively discussed by Russian scholars and academia.

### 3.2 Numbers and Structure of University Teachers with Scientific Degrees

At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the system of the Russian higher education rapidly developed. From 2000-2001 to 2011-2012 academic year, the total number of university teachers increased by more than 1.2-fold. The share of holders of degrees of doctors and candidates of sciences also considerably increased. While in 2000-2001 academic year one in ten professors of a state-run or municipal higher educational institution had a doctor’s degree, in 2005-2006 academic year doctors of sciences accounted for 11.6% of university teachers, and in 2011-2012—12.9%. The proportion of candidates of sciences also changed, from 47.2% in 2000-2001 to 53/6% in 2011-2012 (Education in Figures, 2013). Presently, 2/3 of university teachers have a candidate’s or doctor’s degree.

In the same period, an ever more rapid increase in the number of university teachers (including degree holders) was typical for private universities. From 2000-2001 to 2011-2012 academic years, the teaching personnel of such universities doubled. The proportion of doctors of sciences increased from 11.8% to 12.6%, of candidates of sciences—from 40.9% to 54.1% (Indicators of Science, 2014; Education in Figures, 2013).

The breakdown of university teachers with degrees by field of science has essentially changed. Thus, the number of teachers in arts and social sciences has increased 2.5-fold, along with the rise in the professional and qualification level of researchers in such fields. In 2008, merely 11.8% of university lecturers in social sciences had doctor's degrees, while in 2011, doctors of sciences accounted for 14.8% of all researchers in that segment. The proportion of candidates of sciences carrying out research in that sphere increased from 42.1% to 54.2%. (Kryukova et al., 2014)

Most highly qualified teachers-researchers are in medical science. One in five researchers in medicine in the system of higher education has a doctor's degree. The lowest proportion of doctors of sciences is typical for university teachers carrying out research in engineering (5.8%) (Indicators of Science, 2014).

### *3.3 Salary of Teachers with Different Ranks*

For many decades, degrees of Russian scholars had an exclusively symbolic nature. It was only in 1946 that supplements for degrees and ranks (rather big money for those days) began to be paid.

At the end of the 20<sup>th</sup>–the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, a major factor complicating the life of higher-education teachers was their extremely low salary level. The salary system in Russian universities in recent decades included a mandatory fixed supplement for scientific degrees. Before 2013, candidates of sciences were entitled to 3,000-ruble, and doctors of sciences to 7,000-ruble supplement to salary. But such additional payments could not change the general negative situation. In 2007, an average monthly salary of a university teacher was 13,868.3 rubles, in 2011–23,179.6 rubles. Generally, in 2007, an average monthly salary of educationalists was 64.6% of the salary level in the economy, in 2011–67.6%. (Education in Figures, 2013)

In recent years, a visible positive trend has been observed—salaries of university teachers, irrespective of their professional and qualification status, began to increase. In accordance with the Presidential Decree of 7 May 2012 “On Measures for the Implementation of State Social Policy”, by 2018, an increase in the average salary of university professors to 200% of the average wage in the relevant region is to be ensured. (Presidential Decree, 2012)

According to the plans developed by the Russian Ministry of Education and Science, in 2013, a substantial increase in salaries of university professors was to be ensured. On the average, in autumn 2013, average monthly salaries of all ranks of higher-education teaching personnel were planned to be more than doubled—from 8,500 to 18,600 rubles. Salaries of degreeless teachers holding positions of professors and assistant professors were to increase by about 1.8 times. Salaries of candidates of sciences (usually associate professors) were to be about 2.2 times as much. Salaries of doctors of sciences (full professors) were planned to be increased by about 2.4 times, i.e., an average salary of an associate professor (candidate of sciences) now is to be equal at least to 75.2% of the average monthly wage in the region, and a salary of a full professor (doctor of sciences)—at least 103.9% of the average wage. According to Rosstat, in 2013, average academic salaries increased by 21.1% to 45,400 rubles on the average.

The need to increase salaries forced some Russian universities to reduce the faculty; a wave of dismissals without valid reasons and non-admissions of documents for vacancies to be filled through competitive selection swept Russian regions. Despite all their efforts, some universities failed to ensure the prescribed salary level.

Continuous monitoring and control of academic salary level by the Ministry of Education and Science gives grounds to hope that the problem will be solved. However, the expected increase in salaries carried an unexpected “surprise” from the Ministry of Education and Science: it turned out that increased salaries also meant toughening of requirements to teaching staff and, therefore, a sharp increase in competition among university teachers on the professional labor market.

### *3.4 Teachers' Strategies in Respect of Earning Degrees*

The results of sociological surveys of RSSU teachers conducted in 2009–2012 show their attitude to degrees and identify their basic strategies in this regard. More than half of respondents from the Faculty of Marketing, Labor Economics and Sociology have degrees of candidate of sciences, about one in four—doctor's degree. The motivational and status value of degrees is unquestionable. Surely, the degree of doctor of sciences is the most prestigious. According to the survey data, a large proportion of teachers who do not have a doctor's degree yet plan to earn it in future—more than 43% of respondents. Male teachers are more interested in the doctorate. One in two male teachers who are not doctors of sciences currently definitely plans to earn the doctor's degree in future. The proportion of female respondents giving the same reply is 1.3 times less. Teachers' plans in respect of doctor's degree are directly associated with their age: more than 70% of respondents of the most active age (31–40) have every intention to raise their professional and qualification status and earn a doctor's degree.

Similar plans are made by every second member of the youngest age group (< 30).

Plans to defend a candidate's or doctor's thesis are directly connected with teachers' assessments of the salary system. Teachers dissatisfied with the system of assessment of and payment for their work regard a doctorate principally as a way to increase their income. Many respondents also think that work of a doctor of sciences is assessed more fairly. Apparently, though, this is not exactly so: 2/3 of the interviewed doctors of sciences believe that their salary does not correspond to labor inputs. That is, a doctorate does not necessarily guarantee higher income, although teachers who do not have doctor's degree still hope for that.

### *3.5 Motivation of Teachers with Different Professional and Qualification Status*

The results of the survey of RSSU teachers show motivation characteristics of teachers with different degrees. In response to the question: "What attracts you in teaching in an academic institution?", degreeless respondents find many advantages. Thus, 4/5 of such respondents note the relevance of factors such as convenient schedule and good moral and psychological team climate. For candidates of sciences, a creative, interesting nature of work is of paramount importance—more than 47% of such respondents consider it the most attractive aspect of teaching. More than 2/5 of respondents speak about the relevance of a convenient schedule; about one in three notes the importance of good moral and psychological climate.

For doctors of sciences, the situation is different. It is the only group of respondents that noted the relevance of salary. One in three doctors of sciences admits that salary is the criterion of attractiveness of teaching in an academic institution. For such respondents, favorable moral and psychological team climate is equally important. All other circumstances are of no special significance.

Note that salary level becomes a relevant positive factor only for respondents with the highest social and professional status (doctor of sciences, full professor), while for all other categories salary as a factor of attractiveness of academic teaching is of no importance.

The quality of student population is another factor that has different significance for different categories of university professors: 2/3 of all respondents state that for them personally the quality of student population is very important in selecting a place of employment. The importance of that factor was stressed by all doctors of sciences; the proportion of similar answers of candidates of sciences and degreeless teachers was about 1.5-1.7 times less.

Generally, RSSU survey data evidence that persons with the highest professional and qualification status (doctors of sciences) have the highest requirements when selecting a place of work. In the first place, they are interested in the salary level, self-fulfillment, stability and social security. Their younger colleagues, without a doctorate yet, have to be less demanding. For degreeless teachers and candidates of sciences, professional advancement and ease of travel to and from work are important.

### *3.6 Status Advantages of Degree Holders*

Status relevance of degrees for university teachers in Russia has been hardly examined so far. Few papers on the subject disclose the benefits gained from degrees by persons who are far from higher education, such as political figures, administrators, public figures, top managers of major companies (Kalimullin, 2011). Obviously, university professors' aiming at earning degrees is largely caused by their aspiration for professional and career development. A degree becomes an evidence of special talents, a specific "distinction", higher individual status and advance on the way to the "premier league" of the Russian educational community.

Taken as a whole, a degree makes it possible to:

- Significantly heighten one's status as an expert, as degree holders have better chances of being invited to prestigious or well-remunerated projects;
- Gain competitive edge in the context of general deterioration of the situation on the professional labor market; reduce risk of job loss;
- Raise professional prestige and influence in the local educational community;
- Improve standards and quality of life due to insignificant but guaranteed increase in income associated with a higher qualification grade;
- Get real chances of career advance to positions of head of a university department, laboratory chief, vice-dean or dean;
- Exert more influence on the distribution of teaching load, selection of academic disciplines, etc.;
- Feel one's excellence as compared to less successful colleagues who have not reached that level yet;

- Satisfy one's "competitive" ambitions, feel a winner in the race common for the entire university community.

Yet, far from all teachers are able to use the major status advantage associated with degrees of candidate and doctor of sciences. To have a considerably higher social status, a teacher must learn how to use the degree as an instrument to increase his or her income, not hesitating to use both relatively legal and absolutely illegal, corrupt practices. In a generalized form, the formula of the efficient use of degrees can be as follows: "scientific degree–higher status and career advance–winning a position enabling to earn additional income–getting additional income–ever higher social status".

To our opinion, not all Russian academic teachers have mastered the skills of commercializing their degrees. Most "degreed" Russian teachers have to look for additional earnings to subsist, which proves that, most often, a university professor cannot gain additional advantages from his or her degree and significantly improve standards of living.

### *3.7 Discredit of the Professional and Qualification Status of University Teachers and Reputation Losses*

In recent years, the existing system of degrees and ranks in Russia has attracted the attention of not only teachers and scholars, but also of the public that was not overly concerned with academic career earlier. The mass media have repeatedly raised an issue of the underworld market of candidate's and doctor's dissertations. However, from 2012, the problem of fake candidates and doctors of sciences has a fundamentally new aspect: a famous and scandalous anti-plagiarism campaign, as a result of which dozens of persons have already lost their academic degrees. The procedures for checking for plagiarism, selection of dissertations to be checked and stripping persons found guilty of plagiarism of their degrees are imperfect and at the stage of transformation. However, it is already evident that as a result of the wave of scandalous exposures, the status value of degrees has dipped down. The professional and qualification status of holders of degrees of candidate and even doctor of sciences has been largely discredited.

The university community members think differently of victims of the anti-plagiarism campaign, but reputation losses of persons involved in the preparation and defense of dissertations with a large portion of incorrect "borrowings" are tremendous. Note that this involves not only those who were stripped of their degrees in disgrace, but also those who in some way or other were involved in the thesis defense procedure. Prestigious universities prefer not to deal with persons involved in scandalous "anti-plagiarism" exposures. Many employers in other spheres, too, are unwilling to employ candidates and doctors of sciences, as they consider the value of academic degrees as a professional and qualification characteristic quite doubtful in the situation where the number of exposed plagiarists is continuously increasing.

In Russia, the discussion of unlawful use of others' ideas and texts in dissertations is scandalous and emotional, rather than academic, though the relevance of the "anti-plagiarism" policies for academic institutions and assessment of reputation risks for teachers is recognized by many American and European researchers (Abas and Graves, 2008; Suomi, 2013).

Just want to note, since we are considering the Russian practice, we are talking about widespread in Russia evaluation system of borrowing. However, Russian scientists going on international exchange of scientific information are faced with other systems such as "iThenticate" and in this case it may be for international reputational risks, the essence of which remains the same the only change is the level and degree of discretization of Russian scientists and Russia in General, "world scientific arena.

## **4. Discussion**

Pressing problems of the higher education, yet again undergoing transformations, are intensively discussed within and outside the Russian educational community. Obviously, at the present stage, the higher-education teaching personnel will be the main subject and object of many transformations. In this regard, the professional, qualification and status characteristics of teachers generate great interest at diverse discussion platforms. The principal aspects of our research have been presented and widely discussed at workshops and theoretical conferences. In particular, the dynamics of qualitative and structural characteristics of teachers' community in the context of reforms in higher education was discussed at the 13<sup>th</sup> International Social Congress "Social Cohesion and Social Equity: World Trends and Russian Reality" held in the Russian State Social University on 25-26 November 2013. In the course of the discussion it was noted that university teachers as a social group have an important mission related to the development of the intellectual potential of society. At the same time, low standards and quality of life and uncertain social status are typical for the present-day higher-education teaching personnel. In these circumstances, the improvement of the efficiency of training of academic and

teaching staff and of the policy of the Ministry of Education and Science aimed at the optimization of the human resources in higher education is of special importance.

The authors have prepared a number of publications on the theme of this research in top Russian academic periodicals (Ilyina, 2011, 2012).

## 5. Conclusion

So far, the modern Russian society has not formed a concept of the new social role of university teachers whose professionalism largely determines the development of the national human potential. The accumulation and systematization of information on the principal status characteristics of university teachers make it possible to create a framework for theoretical generalizations concerning the improvement of the efficiency of teachers' performance in the context of modernization of higher education. This research gives a chance to disclose some fundamental trends in the position of teachers with different professional and qualification status. Apparently, for most Russian university teachers a degree is both an acknowledged attribute of scientific success, an indispensable condition of successful academic career, and, ultimately, quite a lawful way to increase their income level.

Naturally, this research discloses far from all social aspects of the transformation of the system of degrees in Russia. We see the development of an efficient and still flexible instrument for increasing the innovative scientific value of dissertations as a promising line of research. The development of new approaches to the modernization of the system of degrees taking into account the existing western standards will also have a considerable theoretical and practical significance.

According to experts, just 10% of members of any society have creative abilities, and evidently still less have aptitude for research. It takes 10, and sometimes more than 20, years to make a true researcher, depending on scientific specialization, and, therefore, all reasonable efforts should be used so that professionally competent, actively engaged in research teachers could not only earn degrees as a high-prestige distinction, but also get adequate financial and moral appraisal of their performance.

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