

Boosting Class

The Ministry of Education and Science of the Russian Federation has announced the second stage of the open public grant competition (each grant is up to 150 million rubles). The research will be carried out in Russian universities and will be spearheaded by leading scientists from all over the world. In his interview with the head of the project "Science and technologies of the Russian Federation" Konstantin Kiselev, Deputy Minister of Education and Science Sergei Ivanets spoke about the characteristics of the project and how to adjust this innovative competition to Russian realities.

Konstantin KISELEV: Sergei Vladimirovich, the implementation of Resolution of the Government of the Russian Federation № 220 commenced last summer. It is an open competition aimed at the establishment of research subdivisions headed by world-class scientists in higher educational institutions. Since the financial support for this competition is considerable even in comparison with competitions held in scientifically developed countries, the attention of the scientific community is equally high.

In 2010, the Ministry of Education and Science of the Russian Federation held the first stage of the competition; 40 winners were announced. Not all researchers were successful in their attempts to secure grants within the framework of the selection that took place last year; however, they all will be able to participate in the second stage, which will be held this year.

Let us refresh the memories of our readers and touch upon the problems that emerged during the implementation of the competition.

Sergei IVANETS:

Indeed, this competition was unprecedented for Russian research

and development and higher professional education both in terms of the scale of the tasks to be solved and in terms of the allocated funds. The participants included researchers, among which were world-recognized scientific leaders. When organizing the competition, the most important task for us was to make it open and transparent. I hope that we were successful to a large extent, since the system of evaluation and selection of the applications was based on high-quality expertise involving a considerable number of Russian and foreign experts, and some world-leading scientists. Of course, there were critical comments concerning the holding of the contest; we will be able to address a number of these criticisms when we hold the competition in 2011.

However, we believe that the overall results of the 2010 competition were satisfactory.

What was the aim of this competition? What results did it seek to achieve?

This event is one of the most complex organizational events that have been financially supported by the Government of the Russian Federation since 2008 with the aim of modernizing higher education. The other major components

of this complex are already known to you. The complex nature of the event was due to the fact that it involved the competition of innovative programs of development of higher educational institutions within the framework of the priority national project "Education," the establishment of federal and national research universities, and the development of an innovative infrastructure at higher educational institutions.

We believe that modern education can be competitive only when combined with research activity. This activity should be promoted, i.e., financially supported. In order to promote this concept, in 2009, a competition was held among Russian higher educational institutions and the winners were announced, which were subsequently converted into the national research institutes. The next stage comprised not just the stimulation of university researchers, but also the involvement of the best foreign scientists. Firstly, these researchers will implement a world-class research project, and secondly, they will establish a laboratory that will be competitive on the world stage. Moreover, the modernization of infrastructure supplies (instruments, equipment, and communications) will take place. For a higher educational institution, the appearance of a "star" in its staff is an opportunity to provide the entire research team with cutting-edge knowledge and first-grade practice in performing research and preparing publications.

Some observers have been critical: "Why is it higher educational institutions only? Why is it not research organizations that belong to the system of state academies?"

Our aim was not to exclude the financing of research in research organizations in favor of that in higher educational institutions. The aim of this competition is to foster

an increase in the level of higher educational institutions and control the quality of education, ensuring that it remains competitive at the international level.

Meanwhile, other organizational and financial instruments are used to support research in state academies of sciences.

You have mentioned the involvement of a large number of experts, including foreign ones, in the selection and assessment of the applications. To what extent was this activity “unusual” for the Ministry?

In general, we have a rather representative and wide expert base which has been used in the Russian Federal when holding various competitions in the research and development sector and in the higher professional education sector. However, during this competition we had an additional problem to solve: that of contacting experts. The involvement of a large number of international experts was necessary for the success of the first stage of the contest. The experts were either contacted directly, or, through special organizations which deal with the organization of the expertise of research projects by nature of their professional activity. This was how the task was solved, and now we have contacts and business relations with these experts. We are certain that this will be a considerable advantage for us at the second stage of the competition.

Sometimes a conflict of interests may emerge even in perfect expertise. It is inevitable. Did the Ministry have to fight against it somehow?

Yes, sometimes it may happen: the circle of experts and executors of large international projects is not boundless. In our case, an expert pledges that he will report on a possible conflict of interests, if one exists, and will not contribute expertise to that certain project.



Sergei Ivanets

We also avoid conflicts of interests due to the fact that half of our expert group includes foreign researchers who do not have any direct relationship with Russian higher educational institutions. Moreover, the expert group leaders pay careful attention to ethical issues, since in the scientific community, reputation is more valuable than those hypothetical advantages that may be acquired through the award of unfair points to a certain project.

Is the geography of expertise wide?

Yes, the geography is appreciably wide and corresponds to the terms of the competition. All countries that are considered key players in terms of science and technology have been embraced: the United States of America, the European Union, sections of Latin America, and a number of experts from South Eastern Asia.

The President of Russia and the Government of the Russian Federation support the idea of involving

foreign scientists and experts. The problem is that people who come to Russia, especially those who are used to a certain standard of existing institutional settings and institutions, may have difficulties adapting to the conditions that exist in our country.

Speaking about the day to day life of a foreign scientist in our country, we see no particular problems: the grant amount is appreciably large to solve these problems, especially if a foreign scientist has to be in Russia for 4 months per year in total (not necessarily consecutively).

Of course, there are some limitations that can cause certain difficulties, such as those associated with the migration legislation requirements, or those connected with the import/export of biological samples and reagents. Unfortunately, I cannot say that all these problems have already been solved. However, we are making progress and they are being solved, step by step.

Concerning the disposition of money, are there any limitations?

The only limitation is that the fund for remuneration of labor could be no more than 60% of the total grant. In all other respects, the money can be spent on infrastructure, retraining programs, and the purchase of reagents and materials. The higher educational institution is responsible for matching the expenses and the contract terms, all expenditures being approved only by the project leader.

Last year, since the competition actually ended in the very end of the year, whereas the applications (including those for the stages of fund expenditure) were filed much earlier, we managed to get permission for higher educational institutions and scientists who won in the competition to change the application format before signing the contract. This measure was undertaken so that these funds could be redistributed for the following period at the stage when the winners are announced in order not to lose them.

We managed to solve this appreciably complicated problem, which was not caused by the scientists.

Will the second stage of the competition somehow differ from the first stage?

It seems very important to us that there are no fundamental differences, since the competition is a whole. The participants of the first stage should be placed under the same conditions as the participants of the second stage.

Are you apprehensive that something could go wrong, and how bad could it be? There can be different combinations, when a highly rated specialist is invited into a higher educational institution which has failed to provide normal conditions. Or the specialist fails to put together an appropriate team. Or it could turn out that the results are not worth the money that was spent.

For the efficient implementation of the competition in accordance with its terms, a share of the funds is sent to the monitoring organizations that are in charge of control-

ling the project at all its stages. There are indices that allow the monitors to precisely trace whether there has been progress in the specified direction or whether some adjustments are necessary.

In the scientific sector, there are a number of risks, and measures are to be taken to minimize them. We consider international expertise to be the most correct one. With the guarantees ensured by this expertise, one may expect that there should be no failures.

When do you plan to summarize the second stage?

We took into account the shortcomings of the first stage, and we increased the time for preparation of applications by two months. Applications deadline is now mid-July. The expertise then occurs, followed by summarization.

This year, the expertise will take less time, since last year we had to simultaneously perform the selection of experts. Therefore, I am positive that this year we will strike a balance much earlier. ●