

RUSSIAN QUALIFICATION "SPECIALIST" IN THE DIMENSIONS OF THE EUROPEAN HIGHER EDUCATION AREA

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Introduction

The inclusion of the Russian education to the Bologna Process along with obvious benefits brought also some problems in questions of recognition of Russian qualifications. In particular, in the late 90's a new, earlier not existing representation and assessment of the Russian qualification «specialist» as qualification «bachelor» of advanced level was shown in certain countries of the European higher education area (further - EHEA). Earlier the Russian qualification «specialist» was recognized everywhere at the same level as the master's degree. Now it suddenly began to correspond in these countries to national qualification «bachelor» and to be considered as a kind of qualification of the first cycle of the Bologna Process higher education. Unfortunately, this radically wrong position has received a boost to further distribution in recent years. As a result, questions concerning the level of higher education according to the Specialist's programs in the international measurements began to arise in countries that send their students to study in the Russian universities.

The following article intends to clarify the true «value» of the Russian qualification «specialist» and the level of education it certifies for the expert community and the students, employers and all other interested parties worldwide.

1. Characteristics of the Specialist's degree

What are the main academic characteristics and criteria of the specialist's degree?*

First of all, it should be noted that for obtaining this type of qualification the student has to study continuously 5 - 5,5 or even 6 academic years and to perform an academic work in volume of not less than 300 credits (comparable to ECTS), in most top research universities in the country the volume ranges from 330 to 360 credits.

According to the Russian legislation there are 3 levels of higher professional education. The specialist's and master's degree refer to the same, second level.

By preparing specialists higher education institutions carry out a major task: the achievement by graduates of specialists' programs of such learning outcomes, which

* This article does not consider the educational programs for medical profession, pharmacists, dentists and people working in the artistic world as this topic requires separate discussion are scrupulously stated in federal and university educational standards and are provided in the section, obligatory for them: «Education requirements of the program». The learning outcomes contain a number of requirements to the graduate, including requirements in the field of professional activity (professional competences) and requirements in the field of scientific and research activity (scientific competences). Therefore, specialists' programs contain a considerable part of special vocational training, which satisfies the Russian employers as well as a quite significant component of scientific preparation and independent research work. The last mentioned component makes the holders of Russian diplomas in specialist's degree attractive for postgraduate programs.

However, the narrowness of professional education and discrepancy to the level of requirements of research preparation are often referred to disadvantages of the specialist's degree, when it is compared to master's degree in particular EHEA countries. This position is incorrect, because specialists' programs certainly provide development of such competences as «ability to create and investigate» in the broadest understanding. They are shown through high and highest requirements, which graduates have to confirm by preparing qualifying papers and passing the state final exams. The achieved learning outcomes are not lower than those, which are obtained at foreign master programs in similar fields of study.

Besides, it is possible to meet such unique fields of study, that could not be found in the majority of countries of the world or that are available only at Russian universities. By way of illustration, we will name some of them:

- nuclear reactors and materials (duration of 5.5 years),
- nuclear power plants: design, operation and engineering (5.5 years),
- special life support systems (5 years),
- aircraft and helicopter engineering (5.5 years).

The flagship of the Russian education and science - the Lomonosov Moscow State University - also has specialists' programs. Among them: fundamental mathematics and mechanics, fundamental and applied chemistry, bioengineering and bioinformatics. These programs last for one year longer (6 years) than those that are stated in the federal state standards in similar fields of study.

Specialists' programs have not been dominating in Russia for a long time. Nowadays the share of students that study at these programs makes about $\frac{1}{4}$ of their total number. At the same time their value and importance in the country's life is very significant. Particularly these programs make a big contribution to the development of the most modern technologies and the most advanced knowledge. Graduates with specialist's diplomas are developers of new technologies. They participate in the implementation of the most advanced researches and findings. Suffice to say that among 24 Russian HEIs that entered the ranking of the world's best universities (The Times Higher Education World University Rankings 2016-2017) 22 universities have specialists'

programs and they are not planning to cancel them. Instead, permanent and accurate work on their modernization is being conducted.

In the project of the National qualification framework of the Russian Federation, which was developed by the authors of this article, the «specialist's degree», as well as the «master's degree», is included to the 7th level of qualifications. This level, in particular, is characterized by the availability of its holders of «specialized and advanced knowledge in a certain area and at the confluence of sidelines of science» and readiness for «an individual contribution to the development and use of ideas, including in researches» [1].

It is claimed that the Russian «specialist's» qualification meets the requirements imposed to the European qualifications of the second cycle of the higher education, to which all «master's» qualifications and other corresponding degrees refer, and also conforms to the criteria of the 7th level of the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED 2011).

2. Recognition practice of the Specialist's degree in particular member states of the EHEA

The specialist's diplomas issued after completing the above-mentioned programs of the Lomonosov Moscow State University and other Russian universities are recognized in particular EHEA countries at the bachelor level. Nowadays the national recommendations, in which this correlation of qualifications is noted, are being developed. These recommendations are introduced, for example, by a number of USA agencies (Evaluation World, Eduquiv, Inc and others); the British National Recognition Information Centre UK NARIC [2] and the British agency Graduate Recruitment Bureau [3]; the Dutch National Academic Recognition Information Centre (NARIC) – NUFFIC [4]. It is considered that such practice contradicts the provisions of the Lisbon convention on recognition of 1997.

To verify that it is enough to compare the scope of study successfully completed at the specialist's programs in Russia with the scope of qualifications programs, evaluated for compliance in the above-mentioned countries. The said indicator of the Russian qualifications exceeds the scope of study successfully completed at other qualifications programs, to which compliance is established by specified national recommendations, for 25% - 50% and more.

Also, violated is the fundamental provision of the convention on need to prove «substantial differences», which is a major argument for refusal in recognition of the qualification at the level established by the legislation of the country of its origin - as with the Russian «specialist's» degree. Actually, such difference exists. However, it is not in favor of, for example, the British «master's degrees», compliance to which is almost refused to establish.

The total scope of study successfully completed at the master's programs in Great Britain and at similar programs in other EHEA countries is only 240 credits (in ECTS equivalent). It is a common knowledge that 3-years bachelor programs (180 ECTS) followed by master's programs lasting 1 year (from 60 to 90 more ECTS) are widely practiced in EHEA countries. However, this does not prevent the experts of certain countries from setting equal the Russian «specialist's degree» (300-360 ECTS) with their own bachelor degree

(180 ECTS) and confirming at the same time that they comply with the fair recognition principles according to the Lisbon convention.

The mentioned facts allow us to state that we face demonstration of unfair and discriminative recognition within the Bologna Process. Sometimes the Lisbon convention is interpreted improperly, without complying with its most important provisions. Indeed such practice procures separation rather than unification of participating countries. In particular, these circumstances impelled the Russian party to obtain support of its positions, including its «specialist's degree» by preparing and signing of bilateral agreements with the member states of the EHEA. These kinds of agreements with France and Serbia [5] have already came into force within the last 2 years. The agreements facilitate the recognition process of the Russian "specialist's degree" in accordance with its level and value.

It is necessary to consider that in a way the Russian party itself has given reasons for demonstration of unfair recognition, which is quite often used in the EHEA countries.

Indeed, by the formal assessment of the Russian «specialist's degree» it should be noted that in this case there is no previous qualification of higher education, which is obligatory in most education systems for obtaining the «master's degree». This circumstance allows to consider the Russian qualification as a certain option of the national qualification «bachelor». And that is how the Recognition Centers in Great Britain and Holland act. Perhaps, the perception of specialist's programs will change after its articulated and clear for the expert community division into two levels/stages that will correspond to the first and second cycles of university education in EHEA.

The information wave was considered as another cause. It was distributed by the Russian news media and other countries and according to it all specialist's programs were supposed to be replaced with bachelor/master's programs. It has created an expectation of a fast and total disappearance of the Russian specialist's diplomas from the educational landscape.

And still the above-mentioned arguments should not be considered as reasons for unfair recognition. Here is why:

First, the superiority of the volume of learning at the specialist's programs in comparison with this indicator that is typical for three-year and even four-year bachelor programs is too big for being disregard. As a matter of fact, the last education year or year and a half at the specialist's programs, which require the achievement of 60 to 120 ECTS, allows to deepen both specialization, and the scientific and research component of this Russian qualification. Exactly at this stage the superiority of this level of Russian education in comparison with the bachelor level in similar fields of study in other countries is being formed.

Secondly, in other countries there are qualifications with lifelong learning programs, that are similar in characteristics to the Russian specialist's programs, issued, for example, in Germany [6]. They are recognized in Great Britain and Holland at the master level.

Thirdly, the lack of the bachelor degree as an indispensable condition for awarding the master's degree is disowned through introduction of educational programs «integrated master's degree» at first by universities of Great Britain and later by universities of other EHEA

countries. Training at such programs does not assume a formal act of awarding the «bachelor degree» [7].

Fourthly, the practice showed that the «specialist's» degree is highly demanded by the Russian economy. It proved its efficiency. Therefore it is unnecessary to wait for its cancellation. Instead, all foreign recognition experts should work with it, fully understanding its level and value.

The understanding of above-mentioned fundamentals will facilitate a solution to the urgent question of fair recognition of the important for the Russian higher education «specialist's degree» with a full and correct consideration of the Lisbon convention's provisions.

Conclusions

The Russian recognition experts are ready to cooperate with its EHEA partners in discussions and in exchange of comprehensive information concerning the Russian qualification «specialist» to gain the assessment of its modern parameters and to find the solution of recognition questions as for the qualification related to the 7th level of the European qualifications framework. It is possible that for this purpose the Russian delegation will organize a special international meeting devoted to this question.

Besides, we also recommend to all Russian universities – providers of specialist's programs - to take steps in the direction of ensuring fair recognition of their diplomas abroad. For this purpose it is necessary to convey more accurately and structured to all interested parties the information on learning outcomes of the given qualifications, first of all, according to the results of specialized preparation and those types, which provide to its graduates readiness for scientific and research activity. In other words, to convey information on educational asset that the students obtain at the final stage of preparation. We recommend to examine the experience of the Lomonosov Moscow State University, in which specialist's programs were replaced with new programs «integrated master's degree» lasting 6 years [8]. They are continuous and are carried out according to the unified educational standard, but are divided into two main stages. After completing the first stage the student becomes a bachelor's degree. Such changes concerning stages of the new educational programs and name of the final qualifications, undoubtedly, remove all problems of its recognition at the master level in any EHEA country.

We consider that the same work can also be accomplished in other universities, including those, where the training is carried out according to five-year specialist's programs. The work should be based on structuring of the list of disciplines and types of study, which form the profile of specialization and the research training of graduates. Without the issue of an intermediate diploma it is possible to refer the basic part of education to the first cycle of university education in the EHEA that is confirmed by the internal university certificate.

Such innovation could be especially effectively carried out at universities that have the authority to develop and realize own educational standards.

We are ready to hold consultations on this matter to representatives of all Russian higher education institutions.

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