

## Russia's education system

Russia's education system has undergone many reforms since Soviet times, but still retains a significant number of traditional features. Comparative tests such as PISA show that, in schools, students do well by international standards and that their skills are improving. On the other hand, there is a serious lack of quality in the country's universities.

### Primary and secondary education

#### Main features

Compulsory education lasts for [11 years](#), starting at the age of seven, with four years of primary education and five of lower secondary education, followed by a choice between two years of upper secondary general education or pre-tertiary vocational education courses of varying lengths. Most pupils follow a standard curriculum, but [7.8 %](#) study in gymnasiums with additional humanities teaching, 5.6 % in lyceums with a more scientific profile, and [2.5 %](#) in specialised schools (with enhanced coverage of, for example, English).

#### Many Soviet-era features survive in the reformed school system

Despite numerous [post-Soviet reforms](#) designed to modernise the school system and align it with other European countries, Russian schools retain many features of former times. For example, although private schools are now permitted, [99.3 %](#) of pupils study in state schools. The system remains a highly centralised one, even though many tasks have been delegated to local and regional authorities. Traditional teaching methods are still widely used, with teachers typically [lecturing](#) from the front of the class. Pupils have a broad education with at least [nine to ten subjects](#) right up to their final year, and only limited elective options; the curriculum is content-heavy and often [emphasises](#) memorisation over creative problem-solving.

#### How do Russian schools compare internationally?

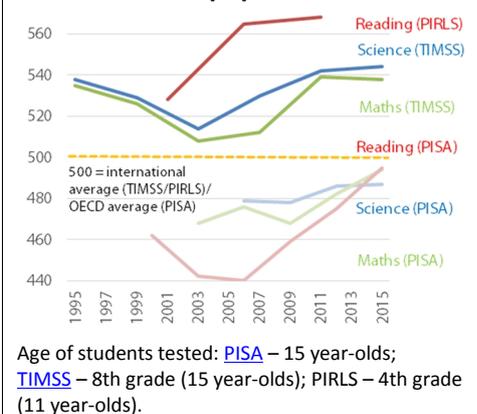
Russia's recent scores in [TIMSS/PIRLS](#) assessments of pupils' skills show strong improvement. In TIMSS ([maths/science](#)) it is only beaten by star Asian performers such as Singapore, while in PIRLS ([reading](#)), its 2011 score was second-best in the world, correlating with an extremely high adult literacy rate of [99.7 %](#) (EU-28: 99.1 %).

Scores in the OECD's [PISA](#) (maths/science/reading) tests are also improving, but are much less impressive: below or only just above the OECD average. The [discrepancy](#) may have to do with testing methods; for example, PISA tests pupils' ability to apply maths skills to solving everyday problems, whereas TIMSS tests understanding of mathematical concepts. The fact that Russian pupils score better in the latter tests may suggest that they are stronger in formal knowledge than in applying that knowledge to practical problems.

#### Criticisms of the Russian school system

[Overworked](#) and underpaid, Russian teachers' grievances often echo those of counterparts in other countries. Well-meaning reforms can have a perverse effect: greater financial autonomy for schools means that [headmasters](#) have become more like entrepreneurs and less like teachers; a capitation allowance, which rewards schools attracting more students with more money, encourages an emphasis on quantity over quality; the standardised and externally marked [unified state exam](#) taken at the end of school has reduced the scope for corruption (in the past, teachers marked their own pupils), but also forces teachers to 'teach to the test', giving pupils what they need to pass instead of useful knowledge that will serve them best in future life.

**Russia: performance in international assessments of pupils' skills**



Underfunding is a serious problem. In 2013, Russia spent [3.8 %](#) of its GDP on education, a considerable improvement on 2005 (2.7 %), but well below the EU-28 average of [5.3 % GDP](#). Due to budgetary pressures, in 2017 federal government education spending is set to decline in real terms [by 2 %](#). School teachers earn [11- 19 %](#) less than the average graduate; they are particularly underpaid in poor regions such as Dagestan, where salaries are just [10-15 000 roubles](#) (€160-240) – around a quarter of a policeman's earnings.

#### *Growing ideological pressure on school curricula*

Soviet-era indoctrination has long disappeared from the curriculum. However, in 2012 President Vladimir Putin [called](#) on schools to instil patriotic values. History teaching, in particular, has come under pressure; chapters on recent history in [new textbooks](#) present an uncritical view of Putin's rule, and echo Kremlin narratives on the 'illegal coup' in Ukraine and 'reunification' with Crimea. Meanwhile, the Orthodox Church is lobbying for a new course on '[Orthodox Culture](#)', to be taught as an optional subject over 11 years.

## Tertiary education

#### *Main features*

Over half of all Russians study at university: [85 %](#) in state universities and 15 % in private ones. Over half ([51 %](#) of students who began tertiary education in 2014) take bachelor's degrees; [short-cycle](#) (up to three-year) professional qualifications are also quite popular (40 %). Students with better marks from their unified state exam study for free; the remainder (around [one third](#) of students) pay tuition fees, typically in the range of 50-150 thousand roubles (€790-2 400) a year, but in some cases exceeding 400 000 roubles (€6 300). State-subsidised low-interest loans are available for the latter students.

#### *How do Russian universities compare internationally?*

Some [54 %](#) of Russians in the 25-64 age group hold degrees, more than in any OECD country except Canada. However, Russian universities lag behind western European counterparts. Not one makes it into the top 100 of the 2016 [Times Higher Education World University Rankings](#) (WUR); Germany has nine.

#### *Poor performance reflects serious problems in Russian universities*

The [problems](#) afflicting Russian universities include chronic under-investment, a lack of international cooperation, and low salaries making it difficult to attract specialists. Quality control procedures, some introduced as part of Bologna Process-related reforms (see below), mean heavy paperwork (lecturers must now produce a [200-page document](#) for each course). There is a culture of corruption; for example, [cheating](#) on exams and coursework is widely tolerated. Companies openly [offer](#) dissertation-writing services – doctoral theses start at 100 000 roubles (€1 600) – and as many as [30 %](#) of dissertations written in Russia since 1991 may be ghost-written. A [finding](#) that over 50 parliamentarians, including former speaker Sergey Naryshkin, had plagiarised their doctoral theses, was too commonplace to attract much attention.

#### *Efforts are being made to improve the quality of higher education*

In 2012, Putin launched [Project 5-100](#), whose targets included getting at least five Russian universities in the top 100 of global rankings. To achieve this goal, 15 universities (a further six were added in 2015) are receiving additional funding – in 2017, 14.5 billion roubles or €230 million. [Some progress](#) has been made, with four Project 5-100 universities entering the top 400 of the WUR ranking in 2015 (however, in 2016 this number fell back to two); participating universities also report an increase in the number of international students and staff. Unfortunately, however, there are no signs that improvements have spread to non-participating institutions, which make up the vast majority and are still underfunded.

At the same time, the government is closing down underperforming universities. In April, 2015 it announced [plans](#) to close two in every five universities; by the end of the same year, 183 had disappeared ([-17 %](#)).

**The EU and Russian education:** Russia participates in the intergovernmental [Bologna Process](#), which is supported by the EU and aims to align European higher education. As a result of the Bologna Process, in 2011 Russia introduced the two-tier system found in many other European countries: four-year bachelor's degrees plus two-year master's. For most students, this replaces the traditional five-year 'specialist' degree.

EU funding supports Bologna-related reforms, for example by [financing curriculum development](#) for the new bachelor's degrees. For 2017, the EU has allocated [€6.1 million](#) from the European Neighbourhood Instrument to help Russian universities with capacity-building. A further €10.3 million goes to Erasmus+ educational exchanges; in 2015 these helped 1 900 Russian students and academics to spend up to a year in EU universities, while 1 200 EU students travelled in the opposite direction.