

CONFERENCE REVIEW NOTES

THE FIRST FORUM OF THE BRICS NETWORK UNIVERSITY

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The first Forum of the BRICS Network University was held at the initiative of the Russian Ministry of Education at the Ural Federal University in Yekaterinburg, Russia on the 6–9 April, 2016. The Forum included representatives of the Ministries of Education and Science and 44 universities from Russia, India, China, Brazil and South Africa to form an effective collaboration within the framework of the most ambitious BRICS project in the sphere of education and research – BRICS Network University. The project aims to create a unified educational environment, the enhancement of academic mobility and training of highly-qualified professionals in the top priority areas of the member states development.

1. The Forum Background and Goals

The Memorandum of Understanding for Establishment of the BRICS Network University¹, signed on November 18, 2015 in Moscow by the Ministers of Education of Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa, laid the foundation for successful collaboration of BRICS countries in the sphere of higher education. The Memorandum

¹ Memorandum of Understanding on Establishment of the BRICS Network University, available at <http://center-brics.urfu.ru/fileadmin/user_upload/BRICS/br-br/MoU_SU_BRICS.pdf>.

states that the BRICS Network University is '*an educational project aimed at developing, preferentially, bilateral/multilateral short-term joint training, master's and PhD programmes along with joint research projects in various knowledge fields according to common standards and quality criteria, given recognition of the learning outcomes by BRICS Network University (NU) participants as per national criteria.*'

The key principles of the BRICS Network University are openness, focus on educational programs, equal rights of all participants, reciprocity, assurance of high quality of the BRICS Network University educational programs, and respect for national regulations. The list of the prior objectives and goals of the BRICS NU include the following: *providing opportunity of high quality life-long learning through different forms of education, facilitating sustainable development of the BRICS countries, and providing training for highly qualified professionals.*

According to D. Livanov, the minister of Education and Science of the Russian Federation, the Network University would contribute significantly to the creation of the new generation of highly qualified specialists with a capacity to work in the conditions of the emerging economies. Thus, as stated by the Vice Minister of Education and Science of the Russian Federation, A. Klimov, the main activity of the BRICS Network University is the systematic MA and PhD student exchanges within the areas of research priority, such as Energy, Computer Sciences, Information Security, BRICS Studies, Climate Changes, Water Resources, and Economics. On completion of their studies, the students will obtain a BRICS Network University certificate.

Ural State University was appointed the Russian coordinator of the BRICS Network University's activities and the host of the first Forum of the BRICS Network University. In accord with the Ural Federal University Vice-Rector for the International Relations, Prof. M. Khomyakov, it was UrFU BRICS Studies Centre that worked out all the documents for the establishment of the Network University. In addition, UrFU is planning to establish a BRICS Centre of Material Studies and is planning to coordinate the efforts of all Russian universities as far as BRICS collaboration in the field of material science is concerned.

The three main goals of the Forum were: meeting of the participating universities' administrators; the discussion sessions of the International Thematic Groups (ITG) on the anticipated future development of the joint degree and short-term programs; and the first meeting of the International Governing Board of the BRICS Network University.

The broad range of the topics discussed at the included course elaboration, titles, and degrees to be awarded, number of credits required for course completion, and credit recognition. In addition, the delegates discussed the procedural and financial issues and other related topics (e.g. adoption of the corporate style).²

² The First Forum of the BRICS Network University to be Held at Ural Federal University, available at <<http://urfu.ru/en/news/news/15320/>>.

2. Forum Program

The Forum program enabled the participants to become engaged in the bilateral meetings, to present their universities during the opening plenary session, and to partake in the lively and productive debates within six International Thematic Groups (ITGs) and the International Governing Board (IGB) meeting during the first days of the event. The last day of the Forum provided the opportunities for the ITGs and IGB to summarize the results achieved and to present them on the closing plenary session. Furthermore, during the closing ceremony the special protocol was signed and the press conference took place.³

3. Forum Summary

The Forum was officially opened by the rector of Ural Federal University, Victor Koksharov, who underlined that academic agenda should catch up with the political one; thus, the collaboration of universities should keep pace with the trends of political and economic collaboration of the BRICS countries. According to Victor Koksharov, higher education and research are crucial for the economic development of the BRICS countries, and thus deeper and wider collaboration in this sphere is vital. At the end of his keynote speech the rector of Ural Federal University welcomed all the participants and wished them success.⁴

The opening speech of Victor Koksharov was followed by the welcoming remarks of the Secretary, Department of Higher Education, Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD) of India Vinay Sheel Oberoi; the deputy Minister of Education and Science of the Russian Federation (RF) Alexander Klimov; Head of International Affairs Office of Brazil Ministry of Education Aline Schleicher; Vice President of Beijing Normal University Chen Li; and Deputy Director-General of University Branch, Department of Higher Education and Training of South Africa Diane Parker.⁵

On behalf of their delegations all the reporters extended gratitude to their Russian and foreign colleagues for their engagement in a mutually beneficial multilateral collaboration, readiness to share the advancements in the sphere of higher education driven by the remarkable diversity of Education Systems in the various countries. All the speakers emphasized that the establishment of the Network University would become a significant step towards the internationalization of higher education and

³ The First Forum of the BRICS Network University, available at <<http://urfu.ru/en/international/brics-network-university-forum/>>.

⁴ The video of the opening plenary session of the Forum is available at <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3Xt1a7-xEKM>>.

⁵ Top Universities of Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa Officially Joined the BRICS Network University, available at <<https://www.newswire.com/news/top-universities-of-brazil-russia-india-china-and-south-africa-10180426>>.

the intensification of the BRICS countries' successful collaboration and developing partnerships on science, technology and education, encompassing joint research projects and extended academic mobility opportunities for the faculty and the students of the involved universities. The main idea of the project, according to the deputy Minister of Education and Science of the RF, Alexander Klimov, would be to launch a large-scale collaboration in the field of Master and PhD programs, and to establish a consortium that would agree on the content of these programs and ensure the quality of education.

After the opening speeches, the session continued with the presentations of the participating universities from each country – the universities that had been selected in the course of an open competition by the Ministries of Education.⁶ During the presentations, the representative of the Indian delegation gave a comprehensive talk on the system of higher education in India and the extensive international collaboration network that the country has – which involves the numerous joint projects with the USA universities, UK – India Education and Research Initiative, Indo-German Strategic Partnership (IGSP), Indo-Israel Joint Research Programme and, in addition, the collaboration with such countries as Australia, Norway and New Zealand.

Twelve Russian universities, selected to partake in the project, were presented by Maxim Khomyakov, the Chairman of the National Coordinating Committee (NCC) for BRICS Network University. He stressed the strengths and priorities of Russian universities' solid research background, which fully comply with the priority areas of BRICS Network University, along with their openness to enroll and host international students and academics.

The Brazilian delegate disclosed the selection process details, in particular, the requirements for compliance with standards of international excellence, namely, the equivalent performance to international level of excellence in the area, and a highly differentiated level of performance in relation to the national ranking in the area. Included among the nine universities in Brazil that were selected are Federal University of Minas Gerais, Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul, National Institute for Amazonian Research, Fluminense Federal University.

The Deputy Director-General of University Branch, Department of Higher Education and Training of South Africa Diane Parker stressed in her presentation that the main criterion for the South African universities to be selected to participate in BRICS Network University project was the research excellence in the particular areas of BRICS studies. While presenting the selected universities, Diane Parker focused in particular on their strengths – such as the international research projects initiated, the output of publication in peer-reviewed journals, the multidisciplinary approaches

⁶ The presentations are available for downloading at <http://center-brics.urfu.ru/news/?tx_urfu_news%5Bnews%5D=571&tx_urfu_news%5Bcontroller%5D=News&cHash=bb5cb3ae2c99f609fb6ed069ef0ef221>.

exploited, the international collaboration and rankings positions in the thematic areas – that BRICS countries are particularly interested in.

The final presentation of International Thematic Groups (ITGs) of the BRICS studies by Maxim Khomyakov provided the participants with the details on possible perspectives of the ITGs Forum work. The moderators of each group were announced, and the schedule of the discussion sessions was agreed on. The list of seven key questions was suggested for the upcoming discussions, including the issues of network mobility programs implementation, practical tools to be exploited, names of people in charge, and dates and deadlines and the issue of ITG chairmanship.

The presupposed action plan for further group work, with the anticipated results, was also presented to the audience. The short-term action plan (envisaged until September 2016) encompassed the following objectives: to come up with the proposal for the programs within the BRICS Studies framework (Learning outcomes for the program); to exchange suggestions about the forthcoming summer schools and short term courses; to exchange research profiles of the researchers in three priority fields of BRICS Studies; and to set up a website forum for the virtual networking and discussion of the BRICS Studies ITG.

The work of the Forum continued in the form of meetings, where the delegates discussed the core areas of the BRICS Network University project's development. Members of the International Governing Board (IGB) focused mainly on the organizational and regulatory issues: the logo of a would be Network University; the elements of corporate style was approved; and the IGB regulations were thoroughly discussed and agreed on.

The members of six thematic groups, in turn, discussed their efforts to develop a robust action plan for implementing the joint programs. They discussed the fields for developing network of Master and PhD programs, taught in English, that would be available for students from all 5 countries; expanding academic exchange within BRICS countries; and organizing short-term programs, such as summer schools, and internships.⁷

During the closing plenary of the Forum, the results of the ITGs and IGB discussions were presented.⁸ In particular, the 'Energy' ITG enumerated the general topics for cooperation in the field of energy, comprising energy economics, energy markets, energy policy and security; renewable, autonomous energetics: technology, equipment, and systems; nanomaterials and metamaterials for energy; electrical and heat power engineering; nuclear power engineering and nuclear safety; smart grids, distributed generation and global energy interconnections; energy efficiency, power

⁷ Top Universities of Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa Officially Joined the BRICS Network University, available at <<https://www.newswire.com/news/top-universities-of-brazil-russia-india-china-and-south-africa-10180426>>.

⁸ The video of the closing plenary session of the Forum is available at <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vqEVhVvRfNI>>.

saving, green technologies; petroleum engineering, clean coal and gas to liquid fuel technologies; and neutron/Synchrotron infrastructure: materials characterization. Furthermore, a new joint graduate (Masters and PhD) program in the field of Energy, initiated by Brazilian university, was introduced. The comprehensive Energy group action plan for the several upcoming years covered, among the other issues, the implementation of the internet platform for information exchange among the partner universities of ITG Energy and the organization of several events, including the international young researcher conference 'Energy saving: theory and practice; the international student's conference 'Radio Electronics, Electrical and Power Engineering'; and a Movable Summer School, to name just a few.

'Computer Science and Technology' ITG identified, first, all the possible areas for joint collaboration within the BRICS Network University and, second, they sorted out five programs valuable for international students and faculty academic mobility, in compliance with the following research areas: Big Data, Machine Learning and Knowledge Fusion; High Performance Computing, Scientific Computing and Complex System Simulation; Software Engineering; and IT Security and Encryption and Cyber physical systems. The report also highlighted the so called 'quick wins' areas of the group, including Student exchange based on the existing Master/PhD Programs within the expertise areas and the areas for the short term exchange programs. The report also presented an action, encompassing the development of 3–4 double diploma programs, the establishment of the Double degree program committee together with the BRICS Quality assurance system, and, in addition, the implementation of various teachers and students mobility programs.

The ITG 'Water Resources and Pollution Treatment' enumerated the possible future activities of the group, including student exchange on Bachelor's, Master's and Doctoral levels; faculty exchanges; short term Specialized Courses; training programs for professionals; workshops and conferences; joint research projects; summer/winter schools; and new Education and Research programs. The action plan and the agreed scheduling of the upcoming events were also presented within the report. The group also informed the audience about some challenges they may encounter while implementing their action plan, such as human resources, financial and other infrastructural support, and bench marking and awarding of degrees in the new program.

The ITG 'Economics' shared their vision on the development of joint Master/PhD programs on Economics for NU BRICS, based on joint research areas. The group also discussed current capacities of participating universities from BRICS countries, comprising MA/PhD programs on Economics and Management, research/specialization areas, conferences and summer schools. In regard to the preliminary list of research areas in the sphere of Economics, the group named three major areas within the focus on BRICS countries' economies, namely, the general area economics, the micro-sector issues area, and the management aspects of economics, each area

consisting of a number of subtopics. The roadmap for the further development and the deadlines had also been demonstrated.

The report submitted by the ITG 'Ecology' focused on creating a joint program of the BRICS NU in the field of 'Ecology and climate change' as a new educational product. ITG on Ecology and climate change proposed the issues to be realized in a short time (2016–2017), comprising new courses; summer/winter schools for BRICS (different thematic, 10–14 days, 20–50 people); inclusive education and 'road education' (student mobility in several BRICS universities in short time); E-learning (courses available online); E-journal 'Ecology and climate change'; teachers mobility and training of teachers; series of workshops, conferences, practical trainings; student exchanges; practical field trainings; ECO&CC Newsletters; and 'Ecology and climate change' on the BRICS NU web platform. The report's framework also presented an action plan for the universities in charge, including the setting of deadlines.

In their closing remarks the heads of the delegations summarized the great work of the two Forum days and the results achieved, with some heads highlighting the idea that, among the numerous plans and strategies, the most robust and attainable should be chosen, thus allowing the BRICS Network University members to focus particularly on such plans and strategies. The participants expressed hope for the established BRICS NU project to become an actual and legitimate tool for the productive and effective cooperation of BRICS countries in the sphere of higher education. According to all the reporters, the Forum was a great first step towards the realization of the ambitious action plans, which had been collaboratively developed by ITGs and IGB. The participants also expressed their gratitude to the organizers and the delegates of other countries for their great enthusiasm for the future joint work.

The Forum concluded with a solemn signing ceremony during which 45 universities expressed their willingness to participate in the BRICS NU project.

4. Conclusion

The first Forum of the BRICS Network University, held upon the initiative of the Russian Ministry of Education at the Ural Federal University in Yekaterinburg, Russia on the 6–9 April, 2016, became a milestone in the development of the BRICS countries' productive collaboration in the sphere of education, science and research.

During the two-day discussions of the international thematic groups, action plans were developed for future creating the suggested joint programs within the following thematic priorities of the BRICS Network University: energy, computer science and information security, BRICS studies, ecology and climate change, water resources and pollution treatment, and economics. In accordance with the action plans developed within the Forum framework, during the next academic year the participating universities will start their first summer and winter schools and explore the opportunities for expanding academic exchange on student and faculty levels.

In a year the universities are planning to launch the first network Master and PhD programs taught in English.

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