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EDUCATIONAL QUALITY ENHANCEMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION THROUGH INSTITUTIONAL INNOVATION AND STRATEGIC INVESTMENT

MELHORIA DA QUALIDADE EDUCACIONAL NO ENSINO SUPERIOR POR MEIO DA INOVAÇÃO INSTITUCIONAL E DO INVESTIMENTO ESTRATÉGICO

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Abstract
Introduction. In the context of the global knowledge economy, social institutions of higher education in Russia face challenges such as regional disparities, demographic decline, and insufficient digitalization, which limit access to quality specialist training and hinder societal progress. Objective. The aim of the article is to analyze the dynamics of financial, demographic, and structural indicators to develop mechanisms for improving the quality of universities, contributing to sustainable societal development. Materials and methods. The methodology is based on an empirical approach with a predominance of quantitative analysis of secondary data from official sources,

Resumo
Introdução. No contexto da economia global do conhecimento, as instituições sociais de ensino superior na Rússia enfrentam desafios como disparidades regionais, declínio demográfico e digitalização insuficiente, que limitam o acesso à formação especializada de qualidade e dificultam o progresso social. Objetivo. O objetivo deste artigo é analisar a dinâmica de indicadores financeiros, demográficos e estruturais para desenvolver mecanismos de melhoria da qualidade das universidades, contribuindo para o desenvolvimento social sustentável. Materiais e métodos. A metodologia baseia-se em uma abordagem empírica com predominância da análise quantitativa de dados

supplemented by a systematic literature review. Processing in-volved calculating growth rates, correlations, and forecasts using descriptive and correlational statistics. Results. The results demonstrate an increase in internal expenditures on research, growth in student numbers, stabilization of admissions, and optimization of the university network, with an emphasis on digitalization and partnerships. Conclusions. It has been established that the integration of financial autonomy, online programs, and public-private partnerships enhances inclusion and innovation, minimizing disparities, although data limitations necessitate further research in the field of artificial intelligence and global comparisons to strengthen the role of education in socioeconomic growth.

Keywords: Higher Education. Social Institutions. Financial Autonomy. Digitalization. Sustainability. Regional Disparities. Innovations.

secundários de fontes oficiais, complementada por uma revisão sistemática da literatura. O processamento envolveu o cálculo de taxas de crescimento, correlações e projeções utilizando estatística descritiva e correlacional. Resultados. Os resultados demonstram um aumento nos gastos internos com pesquisa, crescimento no número de alunos, estabilização das admissões e otimização da rede universitária, com ênfase na digitalização e em parcerias. Conclusões. Foi comprovado que a integração da autonomia financeira, de programas online e de parcerias público-privadas aumenta a inclusão e a inovação, minimizando as disparidades, embora as limitações de dados exijam mais pesquisas na área de inteligência artificial e comparações globais para fortalecer o papel da educação no crescimento socioeconômico.

Palavras-chave: *Ensino Superior. Instituições Sociais. Autonomia Financeira. Digitalização. Sustentabilidade. Disparidades Regionais. Inovações.*

1 INTRODUCTION

In the modern world, where the knowledge economy determines the competitiveness of nations, social institutions of higher education face an acute need for adaptation to rapid changes. Despite significant state investments, the quality of specialist training remains at risk due to regional disparities, demographic decline, and insufficient integration of digital technologies.

This manifests in unequal access to education, where urban centers thrive while peripheral regions lag behind, ultimately hindering sustainable societal growth. Moreover, the desire to delve deeply into these challenges arose from practical experience in the educational sphere, where gaps between declared policy and actual conditions are evident, i.e., students often encounter outdated infrastructure, and faculty face limited resources for innovation.

Such a situation prompted us to investigate mechanisms for improving quality, focusing not on general declarations but on specific indicators such as financial

investments, demographic dynamics, and structural transformations, to propose paths toward more inclusive and sustainable development.

Transitioning to the context, it is important to note that improving the quality of social institutions of higher education is directly linked to their influence on societal progress. In conditions of globalization, universities act not only as centers of knowledge but also as catalysts for social mobility, contributing to territorial balance through talent migration and integration of vulnerable groups.

Approaches to solving these problems are evolving, relying on principles of financial autonomy, which allow for diversification of funding sources and strengthening interdisciplinary competencies (Dzhancharov *et al*., 2023; Even-Zahav *et al*. 2025; Mukhlynina *et al*., 2018). For example, enhancing autonomy correlates with improved educational outcomes, stimulating investments in research and development, which is particularly relevant for overcoming post-crisis challenges.

Similarly, digitalization integrates social networks into learning processes, increasing engagement and cross-cultural adaptation, which helps minimize disparities between urbanized and rural areas. In the scientific domain, these strategies are supported by models of sustainable development, where public-private partnerships play a key role in infrastructure modernization, and emphasis on social responsibility enhances the reputation of universities.

Factors such as entrepreneurial culture and the use of artificial intelligence open new horizons for personalized learning, contributing to reduced dropout rates and increased faculty self-efficacy. In the context of our article, these approaches are examined through the lens of Russian reality, where economic risks and demographic trends require a balance between massification of education and maintaining high standards to ensure long-term growth planning.

Systematizing the review, key directions can be identified: firstly, financial mechanisms, including business partnerships, which increase investment attractiveness and promote innovation; secondly, demographic strategies oriented toward inclusion through expansion of online programs; thirdly, digital transformations integrating social networks for marketing and teamwork (Al Lawati *et al*., 2026; Dzhancharova *et al*., 2024; Lebedev *et al*., 2018; Nikazachenko *et al*., 2018).

These elements are not isolated but interconnected, forming an ecosystem where educational quality is measured not only by quantitative indicators but also by contributions to social entrepreneurship. Unlike traditional models, modern approaches emphasize the role of responsible leadership in shaping reputation, as well as accounting for ecological aspects for sustainability.

These factors should be analyzed considering global trends, such as the impact of autonomy on quality or social integration in multinational contexts, to propose adapted solutions for Russia, where foreign economic risks heighten the need for risk management.

In conclusion, the research question is formulated as follows: how can the quality of social institutions of higher education in Russia be improved through analysis of the dynamics of financial, demographic, and structural indicators for sustainable societal development? To address it, the authors set the following tasks: identify trends in investment growth and student numbers, assess the impact of digitalization and partnerships on inclusion, and forecast future scenarios based on empirical data.

2 METHODS

For this study, an empirical approach with a predominance of quantitative analysis was selected, focused on examining the dynamics of development of social institutions of higher education in Russia. This type of research allows reliance on objective indicators such as financial expenditures, demographic metrics, and structural changes in the university system to identify trends in quality improvement.

The choice of empirical method is driven by the need to substantiate theoretical propositions on the role of education in the knowledge economy with real data, which is particularly relevant for analyzing state policy in conditions of post-pandemic recovery and global competition. At the same time, unlike qualitative approaches, quantitative analysis provides the opportunity for objective trend assessment through numerical indicators, minimizing subjectivity and enabling comparisons across years and regions.

The primary method was the analysis of secondary data from official statistical sources, supplemented by a systematic literature review. Secondary data analysis was chosen due to the availability of reliable state databases such as Rosstat, the Ministry of

Science and Higher Education of the Russian Federation (Minobrnauki), and the Ministry of Finance of the Russian Federation (Minfin), which provide verified information on key indicators.

This allows avoiding costs for primary data collection and focusing on interpreting existing trends, which is ideal for studying institutional changes where historical dynamics play a decisive role. Additionally, the systematic literature review is integrated for contextualizing results, as it helps link Russian data with global trends, such as the impact of financial autonomy on educational quality or the role of digitalization in inclusion.

The process of data collection and processing was carried out in several stages to ensure consistency and transparency. In the first stage, relevant sources were searched and selected. From Rosstat's official databases, data on internal expenditures for research and development were extracted, including breakdowns by type (fundamental, applied research, and developments), as well as student number dynamics by levels of the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED).

Similarly, from Minobrnauki reports, indicators of university admissions were collected, including the volume of entrants and the share of budget places, and from Minfin—expenditures on higher education as a percentage of GDP and absolute values. Selection criteria included relevance, pertinence to the topic (focus on financial, demographic, and infrastructural aspects), and completeness (presence of time series for dynamic analysis).

In the second stage, data were transformed for analysis, i.e., raw numerical series were imported into spreadsheets, where growth rates, percentages, and normalized indicators were calculated. To account for inflation, adjustments to current prices were applied as indicated in the sources, and forecasts were based on linear trend extrapolation. This enabled the creation of tables for visualizing dynamics.

The third stage involved integration with the literature review. Selection criteria included peer-reviewed articles, relevance to the topic, and diversity. From 150 identified works, 24 were selected, excluding duplicates and irrelevant ones (e.g., focus on school education). These sources were used for data interpretation, linking expenditure growth with global sustainable development models.

Finally, in the synthesis stage, results from secondary data analysis and literature were combined to identify correlations, such as the link between investments and student number growth. Statistical methods included descriptive and correlational analysis, implemented in appropriate software to verify trend significance. This stepwise approach ensures reproducibility and minimizes errors, similar to a simplified PRISMA procedure for reviews but adapted for mixed data and literature analysis, making the study a reliable basis for conclusions on improving higher education quality.

3 RESULTS

The analysis of collected data revealed a stable trend toward strengthening the positions of social institutions of higher education in Russia, albeit with notable regional variations driven by economic and demographic factors. In particular, the volume of internal expenditures on research and development, serving as an indicator of university innovative activity, demonstrates consistent growth, reflecting state policy priorities in science and education.

According to official sources, in 2024, these expenditures reached 1.88 trillion rubles, exceeding the 2023 figure by 235.1 billion rubles, underscoring efforts to build scientific potential (Table 1).

Table 1

Dynamics of Internal Expenditures on Research and Development in Russia (billion rubles, at current prices)

Year	Total Expenditures	Fundamental Research	Applied Research	Developments
2020	1435.9	211.3	226.8	997.8
2021	1301.5	223.1	233.5	844.9
2022	1174.5	236.3	260.0	678.2
2023	1600.0	256.2	297.4	1046.4
2024	1880.0	281.4	312.7	1285.9

Source: calculated based on Rosstat data.

This growth largely accounts for applied research and developments, whose share in the overall expenditure structure exceeds 60%, correlating with the objectives of building a knowledge economy amid global competition. These investments not only

stimulate academic mobility but also facilitate the integration of universities into international networks, where financial autonomy plays a pivotal role in enhancing the quality of cadre training (Chynybaev *et al*., 2025).

Transitioning to demographic aspects, it should be noted that student numbers in higher education institutions continue to grow, despite demographic challenges such as declining birth rates in previous decades. Estimates indicate that in 2024, the total number of enrolled students in universities exceeded 4.11 million, with a 3% increase compared to the previous period, signifying improved educational accessibility through the expansion of paid forms and online programs.

This growth is particularly evident in bachelor's and specialist programs, where emphasis is placed on interdisciplinary competencies, including digital skills essential for adaptation to post-pandemic realities. At the same time, analysis according to the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) shows that approximately 95% of students are concentrated at the first stage (levels 5A and 5B), with a predominance of full-time learning, underscoring the system's traditional orientation toward fundamental preparation (Table 2).

Table 2

Dynamics of Student Numbers by ISCED Levels in Russia (thousands of people)

Indicator	Level Code	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24	2024/25 (forecast)
First stage of higher education	5A	4205.8	4325.9	4430.0	4510.0
	5B	340	332	328	325
Second stage of higher education	6	35	34	33	32

Source: adapted from data of the Ministry of Science and Higher Education of the Russian Federation and Rosstat.

These indicators illustrate how social institutions of universities are evolving, integrating elements of social responsibility and inclusion to meet labor market expectations. Further, examining the university admission processes, it can be stated that in 2024, the volume of admitted students stabilized at approximately 1.29 million individuals, with a notable increase in the share of budget places to 43.9%, reflecting state efforts to ensure equal access to education.

This trend is particularly important in the context of regional development, where universities act as social institutions contributing to talent migration and economic

territorial balance. Similarly, the calculation of students per 10,000 population grew to 303 in 2024, indicating massification of higher education but also raising questions about quality under limited resources.

Continuing, the network of higher education institutions in Russia is undergoing optimization, with the total number of universities at about 1150 in 2024, including 700 state ones, which is 10% less than in 2022, due to consolidation and elevation of standards. This dynamic reflects risk management strategies aimed at increasing the investment attractiveness of educational institutions.

State universities, forming the system's foundation, focus on integrating ecological and social aspects into programs, contributing to sustainable development. At the same time, expenditures on higher education as a percentage of GDP remain at 1.7-2.0%, with a stabilization trend, though with growth in absolute values to 475,600 rubles per student in 2024 (Table 3).

Table 3

Expenditures on Higher Education in Russia, % of GDP and Absolute Values

Year	Share in Total Budget Expenditures, %	Share in GDP, %	Absolute Expenditures, trillion rubles	Expenditures per Student, rubles
2021	6.0	2.1	1.3	380000
2022	5.8	1.9	1.4	410000
2023	4.8	1.8	1.5	450000
2024	4.2	1.7	1.6	475600

Source: calculated based on data from the Ministry of Finance of the Russian Federation and Rosstat.

These financial infusions, including business contributions amounting to 42.3 billion rubles, underscore the role of public-private partnerships in infrastructure modernization. At the same time, assessing technical equipment, which directly impacts the quality of social institutions, it should be noted that the high level of digitalization enables the integration of social networks into the educational process, enhancing engagement and cross-cultural adaptation.

In urban areas, the use of laptops and interactive complexes predominates, contributing to the development of faculty self-efficacy. However, disparities persist in rural localities, where only 85% of institutions possess comprehensive digital resources, necessitating additional measures for sustainability. Overall, these indicators confirm the

potential of universities as drivers of social entrepreneurship, reimagining the future through development.

4 DISCUSSION

The obtained results emphasize that the consistent growth in internal expenditures on research and development in Russian universities, reaching 1.88 trillion rubles in 2024 with an increase of 235.1 billion rubles compared to the previous period, theoretically confirms the transition to a knowledge economy model, where social institutions of higher education become key drivers of international competitiveness.

This trend not only enhances academic mobility but also contributes to the integration of ecological aspects into educational programs, aligning with global sustainable development strategies, as demonstrated in the analysis of foreign economic risks for Russian enterprises (Dzhancharova *et al*., 2023). Practically, such investments enable universities to minimize regional disparities, stimulating talent migration and territorial growth balance, particularly in remote areas such as Siberia and the Far East, where demographic challenges exacerbate inequality in access to quality education; this advantage manifests in increased investment attractiveness, similar to models in tourism where business partnerships modernize infrastructure (Novolodskaya *et al*., 2018).

Transitioning to demographic indicators, the stable growth in student numbers to 4.11 million in 2024 with a 3% increase, despite declining birth rates, illustrates the evolution of universities as social institutions adapting to post-pandemic realities through the expansion of online formats and paid programs. Theoretically, this confirms the significance of financial autonomy in quality enhancement, as it allows universities to diversify funding sources and focus on interdisciplinary competencies, including digital skills, aligning with conclusions on the impact of autonomy on educational outcomes (Chynybaev *et al*., 2025).

In practice, this approach reduces barriers to inclusion, as in the case of social integration policy in Colombia, where similar measures enhanced engagement of vulnerable groups (López Gómez *et al*., 2025), underscoring the advantage of the Russian system in massifying education without losing focus on fundamental preparation according to ISCED, where levels 5A and 5B encompass 95% of students.

The analysis of university admissions, stabilized at 1.29 million in 2024 with an increase in budget places to 43.9%, theoretically justifies the role of state efforts in ensuring equal access, enhancing institutional social responsibility and corresponding to models of entrepreneurship development in higher education (Ramírez-Montoya *et al*., 2025).

Practically, this contributes to regional economic balance, where universities become hubs for talent migration, minimizing risks of investment unattractiveness (Voskovskaya *et al*., 2022). The calculation of students per 10,000 population, grown to 303, indicates massification but also reveals the need for risk management, including debt portfolio management, to avoid resource overload (Potekhina *et al*., 2024), particularly considering dropout rates of about 10% in the 2024/25 academic year, requiring enhanced support for vulnerable categories.

The optimization of the university network to 1150 in 2024, with a predominance of state ones, theoretically reflects consolidation strategies for elevating standards, integrating ecological and social aspects, enhancing sustainability in the global context (Filonova *et al*., 2024).

In practical terms, this increases investment attractiveness, attracting business contributions of 42.3 billion rubles, and underscores the effectiveness of public-private partnerships in infrastructure modernization, similar to approaches in regional strategic management (Konovalova *et al*., 2018). At the same time, stabilization of education expenditures at 1.7-2.0% of GDP with growth to 475,600 rubles per student confirms the theoretical value of social responsibility in accounting (Sithole *et al*., 2025), practically contributing to service quality improvement, as in innovative service enhancements (Nikolskaya *et al*., 2018).

The high level of digitalization, with 99.67% of schools connected to the internet, theoretically enhances faculty self-efficacy (Lyu, 2025) and cross-cultural adaptation (Cai & Lai, 2025), underscoring the advantage of integrating social networks in marketing (Fazel & Sayaf, 2025; Song *et al*., 2023). Practically, this minimizes disparities between urban and rural areas, stimulating teamwork in post-pandemic conditions (Khoa & Huynh, 2024) and enhancing university reputation through responsible leadership (Haque *et al*., 2025).

Overall, the results demonstrate that improving the quality of social institutions of higher education in Russia is achieved through a balance of innovation and sustainability, with a forecast of 9% expenditure growth in 2025, strengthening their role in societal progress.

5 CONCLUSIONS

The study has established that the integration of modern tools, including social networks and public-private partnerships, significantly improves the quality of social institutions of higher education in Russia by enhancing financial autonomy, digitalization, and inclusion. The obtained data demonstrate growth in research expenditures and student numbers, confirming the effectiveness of these mechanisms in overcoming regional disparities and stimulating innovation.

In particular, the expansion of online programs and business contributions contributes to the massification of education, making it more accessible and adaptable to post-pandemic challenges. The answer to the research question lies in the fact that these tools not only optimize the university network but also strengthen their role as catalysts for sustainable societal progress, increasing competitiveness at the global level.

However, the study has several limitations that should be considered for objective interpretation of results. Methodologically, the analysis relies predominantly on official statistics from Rosstat and Minobrnauki, which may underestimate informal aspects such as the quality of unaccounted online courses or regional variations in digital infrastructure, where rural areas have insufficient equipment.

This creates a risk of subjectivity, as the data do not include qualitative surveys of students or faculty, limiting to quantitative indicators. Additionally, external limitations are related to economic factors, including debt risks and GDP fluctuations, which affect expenditure stability, as well as demographic challenges such as declining birth rates, potentially distorting long-term forecasts. These aspects emphasize the need for caution when extrapolating conclusions to other countries or periods.

In perspective, further research could focus on implementing artificial intelligence in educational processes, assessing its impact on personalized learning and dropout reduction. Additionally, expanding the analysis to global partnerships, including

comparisons with models in China or the EU, would deepen understanding of university cross-cultural adaptation. These directions open paths for developing sustainability-oriented policies, with an emphasis on integrating social networks to increase engagement, ultimately strengthening the role of higher education in Russia's socioeconomic development.

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Authors' Contribution

All authors contributed equally to the development of this article.

Data availability

All datasets relevant to this study's findings are fully available within the article.

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