

ACADEMIC TERMS FROM RUSSIAN TO ENGLISH

As the world becomes smaller, more and more students are doing degrees or study programs outside their native countries, and more graduates are seeking employment in foreign countries. For those moving between Russia and the US, there are key differences in the educational systems, and therefore educational terminology, which can create confusion.

Here translators from Russian to English face a difficulty; on the one hand, they want to be understood by foreign readers. On the other hand, our educational systems, while similar in many areas, are not identical, and translators feel rightly cautious of blurring the cultural differences between Russia and America, the UK, etc.

This article will examine the most common academic terms and titles. As someone who went to school and college in the US, I will be providing primarily American terminology, and only offering British variants when I am confident of their validity.

Universities and university structures

Some general terminology in both languages is similar; you can talk about higher education (высшее образование) in Russian and English, as well as an institution/establishment of higher education, высшее учебное заведение.

But there are some areas for confusion when it comes to specific names for the purveyors of this higher education. In America, these are split between colleges and universities, but the distinction is minimal and often unclear. Generally, universities are larger, and may contain different “schools” and “colleges,” while colleges tend to be smaller, and consist of departments. This is a very general trend, however, and there are many exceptions, so on the whole they should be viewed as the same type of institution, with many colleges being no less large or prestigious than their university counterparts.

Two important terms regarding the structure of institutions of higher education are “факультет” and “кафедра.” In Russian the larger division, факультет, covers a general area of study within a university. The equivalent division within American universities is often called “college” or “school” (e.g. the College of Education at Johns Hopkins University). So, факультет could be rendered as “college” or “school” for a functional translation.

This term is also often translated as “faculty”; larger divisions of study within British universities are referred to as “faculties.” In American English, however, in the academic context, “faculty” is more often used as a collective noun to refer to all the teaching staff.

Nonetheless, it seems reasonable to translate, for example, Факультет перевода as Translation and Interpreting Faculty, since the term does exist in English-language academia, and this will be clear enough to an American audience.

Кафедра, a smaller division within факультет, is best rendered as “department” (e.g. the Department of Education Policy Studies within the College of Education, which itself is part of a larger university).

But whatever institution they attended, when American students are talking about where they spent their undergraduate years, they will often refer to it informally as “college”: Where did you go to college? (Что вы заканчивали?) Even more confusingly for non-native speakers, young Americans can refer to their university/college as “school” informally: Where did you go to school? Unless I have just discovered that my conversational partner grew up in the same county I did, and I’m trying to figure out where he spent the years before leaving home, it will be clear between adults that I am asking about their university education.

Undergraduate and graduate degrees

One of the biggest problems for both translators and those hoping to transfer their educational background to the academic world or job market abroad is what to call the degrees they receive.

In the United States and many universities in Europe we have bachelor’s degrees, master’s degrees, and PhDs. Universities in Russia are moving towards this system to make their degrees compatible with European standards, and some now offer courses of study for which graduates will receive степени бакалавра и магистра.

But since many Russian universities still operate under the previous system, in which periods of study and degree titles are very different from those in the US, there is different terminology to consider. First of all there is the title of специалист, which is conferred after a five-year course. Like American B.A. courses, it is the first step in higher education, but, as Russians are quick to point out, can be more intensive. In fact, it is often considered equivalent to American bachelor’s and master’s programs combined. For example, one Moscow university is now making the switch from specialist to bachelor’s programs, which will mean a 33% reduction in classes. In official contexts then, a CV for example, “B.A. + M.A.” seems a reasonable translation option; the phrase “five-year undergraduate education” could be used in other contexts.

The next level, under the traditional Russian system, is generally referred to as аспирантура (graduate school), and graduate students are referred to as аспиранты. (After universities switch to the European standard, this program will probably be replaced by a master’s program, магистратура.)

When someone finishes graduate school and defends a dissertation, he or she will receive the degree кандидат наук.

This degree title has been translated in different ways over the years. Since this degree immediately follows the undergraduate five-year education, many are tempted to equate it to a master’s degree. However, to obtain this degree, graduate students in Russia have to write and defend a dissertation, which should be original research averaging 150 pages, with an average time frame for completion of 3-5 years. This

corresponds to the average time frame and dissertation size for PhD students in the US.

So, how should this degree be rendered? One option is the direct calque, Candidate of Sciences, which has the advantage of making it clear in what country this degree was obtained. This could be misleading to the general public though, who might take it for a degree in natural science.

You could simply use “PhD,” which would be readily understood – but might cause confusion as to where the degree was obtained, and couldn’t be used for official purposes. A third hypothetical option would be to create a translation referring to the field of study in the title, i.e., Candidate of Physics, Philology, etc., but this system is not in wide use. This would be a good choice, however, because it would make the field of study as well as the foreign provenance of the degree clear.

What we definitely can’t call a person with this degree is a “PhD candidate,” since that usually refers in English to a person who has completed all the classes necessary for a PhD, and completed the thesis, but has not yet defended his or her dissertation. The equivalent of an American PhD candidate in Russia could simply be described as an аспирант (or соискатель (ученой степени) in a slightly broader sense).

Life is somewhat easier when translating into Russian, as a PhD may be simply rendered as доктор философии. This, of course, does not necessarily imply the study of philosophy itself, but harks back to the original Greek meaning of the word indicating love of learning or wisdom.

Translators from English to Russian should be careful of the title “Dr.,” as this can refer to PhD holders as well as medical physicians in English. Russian doctors, however, (доктор наук) are not usually referred to as доктор Иванов, say. Academic titles such as professor, which will be discussed below, are used as terms of address, but conferred degrees are not.

So translators should first ascertain what the English-language title “Dr.” refers to, and get rid of it as a form of address if it refers to a PhD. For example, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. is always addressed as “Dr.” in English because he holds a PhD in systematic theology, but in Russian he is always simply Мартин Лютер Кинг.

If the academic degree is important in an academic context, it can be expressed as Джон Смит, доктор философии to avoid confusion.

Degree requirements

Russian undergraduate students completing the degree of специалист are required to complete a research paper (дипломная работа) approximating an average master’s thesis in length and complexity (requirements for master’s theses in the US and UK, and for the дипломная работа in Russia, of course vary widely depending on the institution.)

How should the name of this work be translated? Some, but by no means all, universities and undergraduate programs in the US require students to prepare a long

research paper to complete their B.A.; this work can be referred to as a “senior thesis” or “senior project.”

So, since дипломная работа is technically part of an undergraduate program, could it be referred to as a “senior thesis”? The problem with “senior” is that it is a specifically American term; a graduating student in the UK would be referred to as a “third-year student” or “fourth-year student,” depending on the program.

Theoretically, as it is argued that a специалист degree is equivalent to a B.A. and M.A. combined, the name of this paper could be rendered as a “master’s thesis,” but that would create the aforementioned confusion as to its provenance. (When Russian universities make the switch to European conventions, then “master’s thesis” will be a logical equivalent for магистерская диссертация.) For the current system, I would propose “graduation paper” as the most reasonable and clear translation.

Russian graduate students must write and defend a диссертация in order to receive a candidate’s degree. In the US, the word “dissertation” is usually defined as referring specifically to the work submitted for a PhD, while “thesis” refers to the work submitted for an M.A., but these terms are often used interchangeably, with references to “master’s dissertations” and “PhD theses.” Кандидатская диссертация, therefore, can be translated in context simply as “thesis/dissertation” or “thesis/dissertation for a candidate’s degree.”

Dissertation defense

The steps for completing and defending the PhD and the candidate’s degree are similar. One of the first steps in Russia is утверждение/обоснование темы, which could be best rendered for an American audience as dissertation proposal/prospectus defense, in which the student presents a research proposal and plan of work for approval. In Russia, this approval is granted first by the department, and then by the диссертационный совет, officially the “совет по защите докторских и кандидатских диссертаций” (dissertation committee/thesis defense committee).

The next step for Russian students, after completing their dissertation, is предварительная защита (предзащита). This is a meeting held at the graduate student’s department, at which he or she presents a finished dissertation. The goal of this presentation is to find any serious flaws in the work, and point the student towards areas that need correction/reworking. As a rule, American universities do not have this as an official step in the process. Therefore, “pre-defense” seems like a reasonable translation, as there is no existing equivalent.

After the pre-defense, Russian students make the necessary revisions before scheduling the next step in the process, защита диссертации (thesis/dissertation defense), which American universities definitely do have. Another useful term in this context is автореферат – the candidate’s thesis/dissertation abstract.

ВАК (Высшая аттестационная комиссия), the Higher Attestation Commission (НАС), generally oversees the process of awarding candidate’s and doctor’s degrees in Russia.

Dissertations are defended at the meetings of thesis defense councils. The proceedings of these meetings with all the supporting documents are then sent to НАС, which either upholds the awarding of a degree or challenges it.

Russian “doctor of sciences” degree

The step above кандидат наук on the Russian academic ladder is the post-doctoral degree of доктор наук, which is seriously prestigious and difficult to get. According to the НАС website, this degree is awarded to candidates who have made a significant new contribution to their field, have prepared and defended a new dissertation specifically for this degree (not to be confused with their earlier dissertation for the candidate’s degree) and have no less than 50 publications in academic journals or a significant number of books.

There is no equivalent to this degree in America; according to the US Department of Education, a PhD is the highest academic degree available. PhD holders do go on to do “post-doctoral” research, but this research doesn’t have a particular, regulated structure or final degree. In addition, some American universities do offer additional honorary degrees, but again, these are not widespread or regulated.

What may cause confusion on this point is that, as mentioned earlier, PhDs can be referred to as “doctors,” or holders of “doctoral degrees” or “doctorates.” In addition, there are a number of research degree titles conferred within the US educational system that are officially considered equivalent to the PhD. Among these are, for example, a Doctor of Public Administration (D.P.A.), and this list also includes the degree title of Doctor of Science, which refers only to work in the natural sciences.

Similarly, “doctoral thesis/dissertation” refers in the U.S. to work done for a PhD degree, so докторская диссертация can’t be rendered as “doctoral dissertation” without confusion.

The most widespread translation of доктор наук is simply “Doctor of Sciences.” Readers familiar with the Russian system would understand this to be the highest possible degree. However, this translation could also lead to a lack of clarity; firstly, readers unfamiliar with the Russian system might misinterpret the field of study, and might also believe that the person in question had achieved only a degree equivalent to a PhD.

If the text to be translated is a long document with a number of different degrees involved, it would be helpful to use the model “Doctor of (specific field of study)”: e.g. if you are mentioning a Candidate of Biology and Candidate of History, it would make sense then to mention a Doctor of History, Biology, etc.

Доктор наук is sometimes translated as “Advanced Doctor of (specific field of study),” which is a good option, although not widespread – it performs two key functions, making it immediately clear that the person in question holds a degree higher than a PhD, and that this degree was received in a foreign country.

In conclusion, it seems that the clearest option in most cases would be the “advanced doctor” model, e.g. “Advanced Doctor of History.” This would mean referring to the докторская диссертация as an “advanced doctoral dissertation.”

Russian degree	Suggested translation for American audience
бакалавр (under the new system designed to follow European norms)	Bachelor of Arts (B.A.)
магистр (under the new system designed to follow European norms)	Master of Arts (M.A.)
специалист	B.A. + M.A.
кандидат наук	PhD, Candidate of Sciences, or Candidate of (specific field of study)
доктор наук	Doctor of Sciences, Doctor of (specific field of study), or Advanced Doctor of (specific field of study)

University teaching staff

Next, there is the issue of what to call the instructors working at institutions of higher education. When speaking to any instructor, Americans usually address him or her as “Professor X,” regardless of his or her actual rank, as a sign of respect.

There are, of course, rankings within the American university system (see chart below). Of these, one that could cause confusion is доцент; “associate professor” is the most widely used term for the equivalent rank in the U.S. While “docent” is used at some American universities, this word is more commonly used in the US to refer to guides at museums who give tours and lectures.

What is confusing about the Russian system is that the last two terms, доцент and профессор, unlike their American equivalents, can refer either to an academic position or an academic title. For example, an instructor at a Russian university could hold the position of профессор but not the title (звание) of профессор. However, if a person has the title of профессор, they usually have the right to hold that position as well – it would be quite unusual to have a преподаватель who held the title of профессор.

Translating the difference occasionally seems impossible. What about this description: кандидат филологических наук, доцент, профессор кафедры языкознания Иванов Петр Сергеевич. Here доцент is the title, whereas профессор is just the position he holds in his department. The American system doesn't have titles separate from positions.

For most purposes, there doesn't seem to be a good solution: It would sound bizarre to call this man “associate professor, professor of the Department of Linguistics,” so I would just not include the title: “Petr Ivanov, Candidate of Philology, professor of the Department of Linguistics.”

Russian teaching position/title	American teaching position
преподаватель	lecturer/instructor
старший преподаватель	assistant professor
доцент	associate professor

Статья опубликована на сайте о переводе и для переводчиков «Думать вслух»
<http://www.thinkaloud.ru/featureak.html>

профессор	(full) professor
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Hopefully this short overview will assist translators in bridging the gap between our different academic worlds.