 Universities in the European North of Russia

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Introduction

The functions performed by universities in the social and economic development of Russia are rapidly evolving due to major changes that are occurring in the political and economic life of the country. Many of the structures and processes that existed in the Soviet period are being replaced. The traditional role of the Russian university as a stronghold of basic education and of scientific research is also evolving in response to new priorities and demands emanating from various sectors of the society.

The universities of the Northern Economic Region of Russian Federation are experiencing many of these new changes and pressures on post-secondary education. They confront a number of common problems and crises found by universities across this vast country. Yet there are also some unique challenges and opportunities that distinguish their condition from other institutions of advanced education in Russia. A harsh climate, a dispersed population base and continuing limited public investment in facilities and infrastructure create major barriers to the future growth and development of these northern universities. On the other hand, their proximity to vast natural resources, their established working relationship with international networks and the willingness of their administrative leaders to make major innovations in their development roles all point to the possibility that these post-secondary institutions will eventually bring significant change to the Russian north.

The current situation in Russia and, in particular, its peripheral regions suggests that the universities are likely to play a key role in the future development of the country. They will have an essential part to play in educating the new generation of personnel that will contribute to this development process. They will also be the sites of major scientific research that will sup-
port the social and economic development of their communities as well as contributing new technology to the economy. In this sense, it is difficult to overestimate the future impact that Russian universities will have in providing the whole country with a democratic society and a market economy. This is particularly true for the roles to be played by the post-secondary institutions of the European north of Russia.

In this chapter, the authors seek to analyse the environment of change in which university education and research are taking place in Russia today. The focus of inquiry is the special case of the post-secondary institutions of the European north of the country. Their challenges and opportunities are detailed. Their unique roles in shaping and directing the process of economic and social development in their regions are outlined. Special attention is given to their contributory roles of conducting regionally relevant research promoting new technology in business and ordinary life and in educating the key personnel required for such efforts.

The Northern Economic Region of Russia

The Northern Economic Region of Russia (hereinafter the Region), includes the Republics of Karelia and Komi and the counties of Arkhangelsk, Vologda and Murmansk. It is one of ten economic regions within the Russian Federation and is located in the northwestern portion of the country. The total area occupied by the Region is about 1.47 million square kilometres, making it the third largest among all the economic regions of Russia. Its population is about six million (Luzin, 1992).

The Region possesses a unique combination of favourable factors that may contribute to its future economic growth and development. Its physical location places it at the crossroads of the Baltic and Barents regions. It has established good working relationships with its Nordic neighbours – some of the most technologically advanced societies in the world in the fields of democratic practice and technological development. It has become an active participant in a variety of regional and international development assistance projects. The lands of the European Russian north possess enormous stocks of natural resources. They suffer little in the way of ethnic or religious rivalries that have plagued other parts of the country.

The Region is characterised by many unfavourable natural and climatic features. These include low temperatures, strong winds and a long winter caused by the far northern location of the Region. The vast territory of the Region accounts for some significant climatic differences between its various areas. On the Kola Peninsula winter may last for 240–280 days.