

Dr Nikolay Michailovich Kropichev  
Rector of St Petersburg State University

June 27, 2013

Dear Nikolay Michailovich,

In this letter I would like to share with you my impressions regarding PhD thesis defense of Mr. Anton Nizhnikov. This PhD defense in the field of molecular genetics took place June 25, 2013 in the Biology department of the St Petersburg State University. It is my opinion this defense was very interesting and resulted in extensive scientific discussion. All members of the examination board noted that the level of the work exceeded typical “kanidatskaya” and we all uniformly agreed that such format is far superior than standard “zashita”. I mentored several PhD students in the USA and participated at many PhD thesis defenses as a member of examination boards and I can honestly say that Mr Nizhnikov’s defense was at the international level.

In my opinion the defense in the PhD format will help to improve the quality of the scientific work presented by the candidates. In case of Mr Nizhnikov’s defense the work was discussed by 7 experts, all of them world-class experts in closely related fields. This is possible because composition of examination board is custom-tailored to the topic of the dissertation, as it is routinely done in USA and Europe. Because of that the discussion can be conducted at very high scientific level, and a candidate has a chance to demonstrate his/hers familiarity with the field, scientific qualification, and understanding of the data which are presented at the defense.

It is also important that the defense is conducted in English. English is a language of international scientific communication and it is not possible to participate in modern scientific research without knowledge of this language. Defense in English gives an opportunity for a candidate to demonstrate his/hers English language skills and selects against people whose language skills are poor. It also helps to improve the quality of the final “product” and prepares candidate for future presentations at international scientific conferences. Russian science is in the process of integration into the world science and there are now a number of foreign scientists working in Russia or visiting Russian universities. Defense in English gives them chance to understand the presentation and to follow the discussion. For example, my long-time collaborator Dr Meewhi Kim from UT Southwestern Medical Center at Dallas was present at Mr Nizhnikov’s defense. Dr Kim was able to follow the proceedings and she was very impressed by the quality of the work. That would not be possible if defense were conducted in Russian.

It is well known that typical format of “kandidatskaya” defense in front of permanent dissertation committees very often becomes a pure formality. The members of permanent dissertation committees usually represent very broad area of science – for example dissertation committee for specialty “cell biology, cytology and histology” may contain experts from variety of fields such as neuropharmacology, molecular biology, cell biology, etc. It is very difficult for these experts to relate to narrow subject of the dissertation. Moreover, very often outside referees are chosen by the thesis mentor and unlikely to be critical of the work.

For all these reasons I would like to express my strong support to the initiative of the St Petersburg State University to establish its own world-standard PhD degree program. I also sincerely hope that St Petersburg State University will be interested to continue and develop cooperation with Laboratory of Molecular Neurodegeneration that I established in St Petersburg State Polytechnical University with support from the federal “megagrant” program.



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