



Russia's Skolkovo Tech Picks First Research Centers, Nabs Ex-NSF Research Head

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[Grants and Funding](#)
[Student News](#)
[Archived News](#)

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This week, 1 year after being created by the Russian government, the [Skolkovo Institute of Science and Technology](#) took two significant steps toward its long-term goal of becoming an academic powerhouse and an engine of economic development. The generously funded, graduate-only university welcomed the arrival of a prominent U.S. science administrator to oversee its research and innovation efforts and also announced the winning global teams for its first three research centers.

Located in a Moscow suburb that former President Dmitry Medvedev [envisioned as the country's Silicon Valley](#), Skolkovo Tech represents the sort of academic green field that Edward Seidel was seeking as he wound down his 4-year stint at the U.S. National Science Foundation (NSF). "I've thought about what it takes to build a new university, and this place has all the elements," says Seidel, who came to NSF in 2008 to head its Office of Cyberinfrastructure. The next year, he was promoted to run NSF's largest directorate, which oversees the mathematical and physical sciences.

He says Skolkovo's assets include "an interdisciplinary structure that preserves excellence in each field and an emphasis on innovation as well as basic research." Seidel, who created and led a center for computation and technology at Louisiana State University before joining NSF, says he also likes how "computing is deeply infused in all aspects of the curriculum."

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Seidel isn't scared off by a different culture and an unfamiliar language. An astrophysicist who works on numerical relativity, he spent 6 years at a Max Planck institute in Berlin before returning to the United States in 2003. "Moscow reminds me of Berlin," he says. The Russian capital is certainly less foreign to him than Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, home of another academic start-up he has visited, King Abdullah University of Science and Technology (KAUST).

He says friends have asked him if "I'm doing a David Keyes to Russia," referring to the [prominent computer scientist who left Columbia University](#), for a senior position at KAUST. Unlike KAUST, Seidel points out, Skolkovo can tap a long tradition of national excellence in the mathematical and physical sciences.

Seidel says his biggest challenge will be to staff up to a target of 200 faculty members by 2020. "A university is nothing without a strong faculty." The university won't officially open until the fall of 2014, but its first group of 20 students began a master's program last month at four institutions with which Skolkovo has partnered—the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in Cambridge, ETH Zurich in Switzerland, the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, and Imperial College London.

Yesterday, Skolkovo announced the three international teams picked to create the first of an anticipated 15 research centers. It chose the winners from an original pool of 129 applications, later winnowed to 13 semifinalists, that proposed centers across five areas. Pending completion of negotiations, each team will receive roughly \$10 million a year for up to 5 years to pursue research in the following areas:

Infectious Disease and RNA Therapeutics: proposed by leading partners from MIT, and Lomonosov Moscow State University, (MSU), with participation from University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center in Dallas.

Stem Cell Research: proposed by leading partners from University Medical Centre Groningen in the Netherlands, and Vavilov Institute of General Genetics in Russia.

Electro-Chemical Energy Storage: proposed by leading partners from MIT and Lomonosov MSU.

***Update 11:07 a.m., 2 October:** This item has been updated to include more information about Skolkovo's current students and research center applicants.

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