

The Reform of Russian Higher Education: What We Had, What We Lost, What We Gained

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Higher education in Russia between 1917 and 1991 is now known as the “Soviet system of higher education.” This term refers to a phenomenon with its own history, philosophy, and ideology of development, as well as referring to a widespread network of different institutions created in response to the needs in all spheres of social, economic, political, and cultural life of Russian society during that time period. The U.S.S.R. no longer exists—the centralized planned economy is gone, the Communist one-party political system is over, and Russian higher education is therefore in a period of massive transformation. To project the future directions of higher education, it is useful to understand what we have lost and gained under the current reforms.

Private Higher Education

One significant difference is that a new, private sector in higher education has developed. There are currently 553 public institutions of higher education, enrolling over 2.6 million students. Fifty-seven of these institutions are classical universities, and the rest are training institutes for education (156), agriculture (62), arts and cinematography (38), medicine (47), sports and physical culture (10), construction (21), and transportation and communication (29). Perestroika and other reforms have created a need for individuals with proficiency in certain fields of knowledge—such as economics and humanities. This need has been filled by over 200 private institutions, currently enrolling over 60,000 students.

Higher Education Finance

Under the Soviet system, education was free for all and state stipends were given to students who excelled. Now, it is only free for students who have passed their entrance exams *and* were selected within the number of so-called “budget students”—the government is willing to provide the university with funding for only a certain number of students each year. The “Law On Education” allows universities to take a limited extra number of students who are supposed to pay tuition and for dormitory space, but not

for libraries. The sum of these costs varies from one to several thousand dollars per year. Education is not free for students who have previously received a diploma from any institution, or for non-Russian residents.

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In 1991, education was considered a major state priority, and roughly 10 percent of the annual budget was allocated for a wide variety of purposes. Formerly, higher education institutions received funds from the government for wages and stipends, for construction and maintenance of faculty and staff housing, academic buildings and dormitories, and for the development of well-equipped laboratories. Now higher education receives less than 2 percent of the annual government budget, almost all of which goes toward wages and students’ stipends. There are no funds for maintaining buildings, for buying books for libraries or replacement of scientific or other equipment, for paying for the electricity, water, central heating, and other utilities. Institutions currently receive less than 14 percent of the capital investment funding they require, and the purchase of equipment for educational needs has come to a complete stop.

New laws allow universities to find or earn extra money themselves through different forms of commercial activities (including private investments, the production and sale of goods, and the provision of revenue-generating continuing education programs). The most common (and easy) form of generating extra revenue is through renting buildings. This has become popular among central universities in particular (such as in Moscow and St. Petersburg), where several spacious dormitories and academic buildings have become vacant due to declining enrollments. However, this

has become a significant problem for these institutions. Having rented buildings to virtually any commercial business, the universities are now faced with rising crime and violence on their campuses. To stay in a dormitory which includes its own bars, restaurants, goods storage facilities—and a growing number of criminal ventures—is not always the best and safest place for studying.

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But perhaps the most serious change for many institutions has been the proposal of the State Committee of Higher Education to put most regional universities on a local budget, leaving state government financing for only a few to create “regional scientific centers.” As regional governments have no funds to support them, many institutions are predicted to close down. Regional budgets are based on local enterprises’ taxes, which in the current economic environment do not even generate enough funds to keep high schools, hospitals, kindergartens, or public transportation systems in good order. Closing local universities will mean shutting thousands of high schools seniors out of higher education. Where can they go after school? How can they make their living if there are more than 10 million unemployed? Needless to say, costly private universities are not an option for most of these students or their parents. It is not difficult to predict a further rise in crime and violence.

Prestige and New Degrees

The Moscow and St. Petersburg universities have always been regarded as the most prestigious in Russia, with the best faculty, laboratories, and libraries. While the competition for students at these institutions is still quite high, they are losing increasing numbers of talented students from the provinces who prefer to stay closer to home (who cannot afford the cost of living in the major cities), foreign students (who are no longer supported financially at Russian institutions), and students from the former republics, where the fear is that someday a Russian university diploma will not be honored. So these central universities are in-

creasingly becoming institutions for residents of their cities—this is not a good trend in the system.

Decisions

Recent decisions have been made in Russia apparently without much thought for the consequences. One misguided decision was the blind copying of the Western and American structures of higher education. Traditionally, Russian students study for five years to receive a diploma that gives them the credentials to work in a certain field of knowledge (e.g., teachers, medical doctors, or engineers). A decision was made on the national level earlier this decade to create a six-year system of higher education and to divide it into three separate stages: two years general education with a special certificate; two additional years for the best students who will be awarded a bachelor’s degree, and two years more for the best of the best, ending in a master’s degree. Some universities accepted the idea with great enthusiasm. Unfortunately, the result has not been favorable for their students. Confusion abounds over what a Master’s degree means for the Russian workplace—most employers are comfortable with the traditional diploma as evidence of the appropriate training.

Conclusions

In sum, despite enormous political and economic changes, a Russian system of higher education exists and functions. Official ideology has been removed from the curriculum, and the existence of political parties inside educational institutions is prohibited. Universities continue to employ quality faculty and staff, and junior faculty do research and defend dissertations. Russian youth have not lost their taste for advanced studies—competition for admission to the finest institutions is quite high. Buildings and facilities created in decades past remain in acceptable—although not prime—condition, and give universities the chance of surviving and the hope, if not assurance, for a better future. And there is a growing perspective in the society after a five-year period of reforms, that instead of trying to adjust the system of education to fit the reforms, the reforms themselves have problems that need to be solved.