

Towards a Liberal Russian Education

Charting a Postcommunist University Curriculum

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Russian university education has been experiencing some serious changes since the fall of communism and the ensuing drastic transformation in the country's general outlook. This is why merely replacing the old curriculum (Modern Marxist Practice 101 and such things) with a new one will not suffice. The entire structure of Russian universities must be redefined, since the present structures were inherited from a time when the Communist Party ruled the country and dictated the thrust of education. It was a time when the universities were supposed to manufacture the cogs of the Communist machine—not teach a progressive, multi-disciplinary curriculum aimed at broadening the minds of the students to compete in a chaotic world.

Moscow State University (MGU), as the largest and most prestigious school of higher learning in the 15 new post-Soviet states, is being looked upon to redefine higher education to meet the challenges of today. Most other universities will follow whichever path MGU takes, so it would be pertinent to discuss what MGU is doing to liberalize and broaden its educational curriculum to prepare the next generation of students now that life has suddenly become more complex and more dynamic—and now that the state no longer plans the entire lives of its citizens. In this context, the writer seeks with this article to define how university education in Russia today suffers from postcommunist dislocation and how taking a path of liberalization (in terms of “humanities” and “liberal arts”) might prepare the future leaders of Russia better to modernize and decommunize the country, and bring it to world standards.

Making Education Relevant

The catch phrases which have appeared recently of the very term “liberalization of education” unfortunately remind one of the phrases computerization, “chemistryization” or collectivization. That is why this relatively new concept for Russia suffers from three basic misunderstandings: first, liberalizing education is a phenomenon peculiar to our time which earlier did not exist. Second, education itself can also exist without liberalism. Third, its attainment can be achieved through the aid of a wide variety of similar means, programs, methods and the like. To these misunderstandings this article offers three alternatives. The first is that the process of liberalizing

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education is eternal—it exists as much as education itself exists. Second, it cannot be separated from the process of education. Third, the process is varied and no single “model” exists suitable for every culture all of the time.

A liberal education existed both in antiquity and in our time, both in university and pre-school education, both in the education of the engineer and the philologist. Therefore, many variants exist as well as many models. Many of the goals of a university education and those of a liberal education are quite similar—the ideals of universality (a broad-based liberal education—that is why they are called universities), a knowledge of history, cross-cultural studies, value judgements and other timeless subjects.

It is also possible to talk about the social goals of education—the formation in a person of certain social, cultural and political traits through the educational process. Unfortunately, contemporary education is not sufficiently universal or liberal. A university graduate has a special knowledge in a narrow field, knowing little or nothing from other fields. A lack of knowledge in linguistics and psychology for the physicist and of biology and physics for the lawyer is not an annoying exception, but rather the rule. So one of the urgent tasks at hand is to achieve the idea of universality.

One immediate obstacle to this is quite curious. It turns out that while it is considered normal and obvious that mathematicians, physicists, biologists and the like, must know about the social sciences, the opposite is not true. A historian, economist or psychologist has the right to emerge from the halls of the university without the slightest idea about the fundamental laws of physics or the most important achievements of the earth sciences or even an elementary knowledge of mathematics. If this is abnormal, which for our purposes it indeed is, then by analogy there should be a process of “mathematization” and “scientification” in the curricula of the humanities students and social scientists.

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Another problem is that all the while education is being liberalized, or universalized, the educator must keep in mind the fact that the university is already being criticized for teaching material which is totally irrelevant and even useless in real life. Theory and practice are far apart and becoming more so every day. The orientation of education today is politically, socially, and culturally weak, and it fails to prepare its graduates to act in modern conditions. The task here would be to insure that the new liberal education not be too theoretical, and that the graduate acquires literacy in many relevant and practical fields, such as, say, foreign languages.

What mechanism can be used in the development of a new universal education? There is more to it than simply cramming history, economics,

philosophy and sociology courses into the students' curricula.

A little departmental perestroika is needed. For example, if the present liberalizing strategy is implemented within the existing university framework, students would have to leave their university school (in Russia they are called "faculties") when it would be better to integrate highly qualified specialists who possess a serious historical and philosophical background into the exact science faculties, and vice-versa. But much will depend also on extra-university factors for which no amount of planning within the university will do. These include other opportunities presented to the student linked to his education—such as the city, the country, social interaction, contacts with political and social organizations, the economic conditions, etc. All of these things undoubtedly influence the process of liberalization and can even determine its success or failure. The student's access (or lack thereof) to libraries, museums, and theaters influence his chances at fulfilling a truly universal education. Finally, the openness of society, its orientation toward contacts with other societies or countries is also a most important factor in the process we want to achieve. But back to the university's perestroika. The main tasks here would be the teaching of humanities disciplines for non-specialists, the organization of a second major in the humanities for students, and the teaching of a synthesized humanities curriculum.

Changing the Structure

The first task, teaching humanities disciplines to non-specialists, must rely on many principles. The most important of these is probably standardization within Russia and with the world. University diplomas should be compatible with other universities, and that is why if a new educational policy is to be carried out, Russian universities must set a minimum amount of humanities courses a student must take as well as the university humanities disciplines required, and the manner of evaluation. If that doesn't exist, and if universities because of their lack of resources fail to teach a foreign language or philosophy, or if there is less than one-third of study time allotted to the humanities, or if there are only elective courses, then one cannot speak of any compliance with world-wide and national university standards or of the universal acceptance of a diploma—a very important consideration for the post-graduation "real world."

The second important factor after standardization would be a strong and uniform university-wide policy that coordinates from the center the new liberal education reforms. The university is not merely the name of the sum total of its sub-divisions—a "ministry of colleges"—and so the university education for the new Russia should be the concern not only of the individual university colleges or faculties, but of the entire university. The lack of a university-wide policy in this regard and the transferral of many responsibilities to the colleges cause many negative tendencies. The most

immediate of them centers around pragmatic considerations such as finances. The lack of funds push colleges constantly to change the teaching of even the most basic fundamental disciplines. Worse even, the teaching of the “non-basic” humanities disciplines, which are precisely the cornerstone of the entire liberalizing plan we are discussing, also get pushed aside in the cutbacks. Colleges can also be quite peculiar about teaching non-basic humanities disciplines while they tend to emphasize those vintage, non-risky disciplines. This is understandable—deans would be the last congratulated and the first blamed if a new radical curriculum fails. The third problem is also quite interesting. For many decades the staff and professors (especially those of the science colleges) were forced to assimilate “humanities” disciplines into their curricula—subjects such as Dialectical Materialism, Scientific Communism and the like. This practice has basically spoiled the entire noble idea of a humanities education as a serious, modern and fundamental process.

So in order to overcome what promises to be serious opposition from the faculties, from the professors as well as from the departments, the new Russia-wide liberal education policy must be adopted at the level of the university academic council—the highest ruling body of the Russian university. This one should set a university-wide standard and policy in the form of fixing minimums of humanities study hours, disciplines studied, and test methods. Further, the academic council must determine a list of general university courses suggested for all university students from which a choice is possible but the number cannot be less than an established minimum. It would be possible to sanction a list which consists of a few courses belonging to each of the basic, generally required disciplines—for example, fundamental courses in philosophy, economics, history, sociology and political science, which a student can master and pass examination, even if it were one course from each group. Which disciplines, the amount necessary, who will provide them—all of these questions must be solved at the university level. As a whole, the number of general university courses required must represent no less than one-third of the total number of humanities disciplines studied at the university.

Under the university is the college or faculty, whose mission is the preparation of specialists. Therefore, the college will be key in liberalizing education. Though the general strategy must be implemented at the university level, the college should have flexibility to shape several aspects of the strategy. It can even add to the requirements, by emphasizing other fundamental courses like psychology, law, and the like. It might consider the advisability of its own students to study a series of special courses. The college would occupy another third of the humanities courses required for graduation.

Finally, the third important aspect in the future Russian university is the

student himself. It must be possible for him to add to the courses determined by the university and the college additional humanities courses which he can take in the faculty of his choice. One recent experiment done in many MGU faculties to broaden student input in education is to allow the student to choose among three different professors the same course being taught simultaneously.

One very important aspect of the new model which is a world standard but quite a novelty in Russia is the idea of a second major in the humanities for students of particular fields—what we would call a humanities specialization. In the U.S., Great Britain, and many other countries it is traditional for many institutions of higher education to have a required humanities specialization. But in Russia, it would be a tradition well worth beginning. A second specialization would better enable a university graduate to adapt to the country's new conditions (for example, a specialization in management for chemistry or biology students), which would create such combinations as a "political scientist-ecologist," or a "historian of science." What the university must do is create not only the possibility, but the incentive for the student to experiment with such double majors.

Achieving the Goal

What methods must be used to accomplish a humanities education in the university? In this writer's view, three variations are possible. The first—completely abstract—consists of the idea that in each structural subdivision of the university there must exist a department of humanities education, an analogue of, for example, a Department of Foreign Languages in a College. I think that this road at the present moment is a dead end. The lack of personnel and the underdevelopment of basic programs will lead a humanities education of this sort away from analytical work and to the destruction of its fundamental essence, and in addition will turn them into "closed" colleges, obedient bearers of the will of their leaders. Attempting to force the college to carry out the functions of a university will only shatter students' careers.

A second and more widespread variant is to transfer departments which do humanities education to the corresponding colleges. Lately this has been done in the majority of Russian universities. Basically, this method contains only three positive aspects: (1) the contact of liberal arts teachers with instructors of the college who conduct scholarly research and the training and retraining of personnel (2) the reduction of administrative sub-divisions in the university and (3) more flexibility for colleges to interpret a university-wide liberalizing policy. However, there are also negative aspects. First, the task of a humanities education is not the main concern of specialized colleges. Therefore it is possible that economists who give lectures for physicists will consider this to be secondary, unnecessary, extra work. If one adds to this

the inevitable skepticism of the physicists towards the economists, then it is clear that a tendency to reduce courses and worsen teaching can find abundant soil. A second problem is the fact that a humanities education will be charted in college waters, which means fewer inter-disciplinary courses and a smaller curriculum. A major such as Sociology of Economics and Science Management will be hard to imagine in a college where the courses are taught by lawyers, economists, sociologists and philosophers.

The strategic winner is, then, the third variant—the creation of a powerful, university-wide sub-division, a sort of institute dealing specifically with a socio-humanities education. It has many tasks—the main of which is the preparation and fulfillment of a system of humanities education in the university. An institute like that has been created at Moscow State University and other Russian universities are watching closely. It is called the Center for Social Sciences and Humanities, and offers both the fundamental courses accepted by the University Academic Council as well as those required by the different colleges or faculties, and it coordinates the different faculties so that students may exploit the potential of the entire university and mold their majors with courses from whatever faculty they choose. The existence in the Center of basic sub-divisions in humanities education (philosophy, history, economic theory) provides the university with a mechanism to achieve a *university-wide* policy in the area of humanities education. There are also experimental sub-divisions, temporary faculty task forces which provide the preparation of new disciplines and new cycles of courses. However, in order for any university sub-division to become full-fledged, it absolutely must achieve certain functions: (1) a scholarly research function which permits having both a professorial-instructional staff and scholarly research personnel whose primary task is to prepare the basis for the development of a humanities education (2) the training and retraining of personnel for the different programs (graduate, doctoral, specific courses for personal and professional improvement, etc.), and last but not least, the preparation of its own students.

The Center for Social Sciences and Humanities, created a year and a half ago, combines the faculty of nine departments and two laboratories and has the rights of a college within MGU. The Center professors and instructors comprise about 150, who along with more than 250 instructors from other colleges at MGU as well as from other institutions of higher learning and scholarly establishments, are in charge of liberalizing education at MGU—of teaching a new humanities curriculum. More than 20 basic and 300 special courses have been prepared. Working along with the basic sub-divisions are experimental faculty task forces which prepare and teach cycles of courses such as The Basics of Stock Exchange and Business Activity, Economics, Sociology and Science Management, Applied Philosophy, History of Civilization, and others. At the Center a few hundred undergraduate

students, graduates, and doctoral candidates are enrolled, and various programs for personal and professional improvements are conducted. Cooperation is actively carried out with a university in Germany (Humboldt University), in Italy (Naples), the U.S. (state universities in Utah, Delaware, Pennsylvania and others). In the near future this Center should be reorganized into an institute with the right to graduate its own students.

Conclusion

There is no question that Russia needs a new policy on university education to meet today's mounting challenges. Since the new educational strategy explained in this article has only enjoyed a short time to straighten out the

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problems accumulated over many years, a prognosis beyond the intended goals of the strategy will have to wait for a few more issues of *Demokratizatsiya*. By then most Russian universities would have followed MGU, as is usually the case, in charting a new postcommunist policy to broaden the students' minds as opposed to teaching them

submission to a narrow system. This policy intends to teach them not to be a cog in the machine, but to think of the many aspects which make the machine work, and to dismantle the machine while constructing a new liberal society.

Those university educators intent on bringing to Russia a policy of liberalization or humanization must keep in mind a sobering question: how to adapt the university to rapidly changing conditions amid general chaos and deterioration. But that is what the university is all about after all—being the first to receive the call when the nation is in trouble. Moscow State University, the originator of the democratic reforms that woke up the nation, has been called upon to keep it awake. It will not be an easy task, but the standard has been set and the process has begun.