

# Higher education in modern Russia: Progress of globalization or perpetuation of the Soviet system (An individual student perspective)

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## Abstract

Modern higher education rapidly transforms into a global academic network. Russian higher education has undergone considerable change in the last ten years, yet there is hardly a single research presenting the progress of academic reforms from the perspective of an individual student. This article is an attempt to analyze the status of the modern Russian higher education from a student's perspective.

University admission system in Russia requires for each applicant to pick a precise academic specialization during the enrollment process. Russian higher education responds to the communal request for public vocational training in the professional fields selected by the state. Russian students don't have any control over curricula and have minimum decision-making about personal academic matters up to the moment of graduation. Russian government keeps the Soviet tradition of controlling all academic matters of each university through the unified regulations in the format of "typical university rules" and a "typical university charter" mandatory for all national higher schools. All graduates of Russian higher educational institutions receive typical state issued qualification diplomas having "professional specialty" written into it, like in the Soviet times. On the other hand, recent reforms in national higher education brought a lot of uncertainty and possibly much more expenses to the Russian college applicants, because of the introduction of tuition in many colleges.

Modern Russian university establishment has an

obligation to perform "a production of highly qualified specialists to the nation", which is identical to the motto of a Soviet higher school. Russian universities are focused on the "proper teaching process", but not on establishing an encouraging creative study environment. A teacher is a major vehicle of the education progress in Russian higher schools, while a student is just "an object of teaching."

Soviet component is still overwhelms formal administration of the Russian academia, creating a conflict with modern tendency in global higher education, placing intensity of the student's involvement into academic and professional decision-making as the key indicator of success.

**Keywords:** higher education, globalization, internationalization, Soviet system, Russian academia, university

## Introduction

Modern higher education rapidly transforms nowadays from being a matter of national social infrastructure into a global academic network with no borders or boundaries. This phenomenon is called "Globalization of Higher Education" and is presently considered a vital advancement for any university system worldwide, despite all possible specifics of its political, social, economical or cultural environment (Atlbach, 2004; Knight, 2003; deWit, 2002).

Over the last ten years higher education system

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of the Russian Federation has undergone considerable change. It had to convert its focus from the political agenda of the Communist Party leadership to the economic needs of markets, and individuals. Emergence of private higher education, diversification of financial sources instead of a reliance solely on state financing, and introduction of dozens of new study programs and training courses - these and many other innovations created an escalating reformation process in the Russian higher education. Yet, there is hardly a single research presenting the progress of changes inflicted by globalization in the Russian academia from the perspective of an individual student. What constitutes the reality of new, changed and internationalized Russian university to an average representative of almost seven millions of Russian students? How changed global status of Russian academia, so much discussed in the academic press, has changed access, context and equity of higher education for the student masses nationwide? Do Russian students really study today in a very different university comparing to the higher institutions their parents studied at, during the Soviet times?

Using data from available research literature, Russian legislation and published statistics on the problem, the author of the proposal suggests analysis of the status of the modern Russian higher education from a student's perspective. The bias of the thesis is that the Soviet component is still overwhelms the formal administration of the Russian academia.

### Russian academe and globalization

Traditionally, Soviet academe had a very exclusive position in the global educational network following pure political objectives in the progress of international higher education (Connely, 2000; Glowka, 1987; Peteri, 2000). Russian educators present national university framework as a totally new, post-Soviet system (Fedorov & Erkovich, 2004; Melnikova, 2001; Sadovnichiy, 2003; Shukshunov, 1998). Yet, many Russian scholars repeat the old claim about Russian higher education occupying a unique niche in the process of globalization (Baidenko, 2005; Galaktionov, 2004; Strongin, 2004; Tkach, 2003). It is most imperative to determine how far the current organization of higher education in Russia diverges from the autocratic university model of the Soviet past to en-

dorse or disregard this statement. In modern literature on the subject, the situation is often presented in a straightforward manner: the USSR collapsed in early 1990-s, burying the Soviet system under the dust of the falling wall that separated it from the rest of the world (Sadlak, 2000). Liberated out of the former Soviet realm, free nations swiftly built new higher education structures in their countries (Scott, 2000). Rapidly integrating into the international academic network, scholars of these newly independent states (NIS) are now take an active part in the global academic mobility, rush enthusiastically into the international research collaboration and embrace the traditions of Western college culture (Bain, 2003; Sutyurin, 2004). Some authors name this process "democratization", some define it as "westernalization", but all conclude that the progress of conversion of the Soviet higher education system into a Western-like model goes forward full speed (Arsen'ev, Gerasimova, 2002; Bepalko, 1996; Kozlova, 2001). The major definition used by the Russian authors depicting modern university life in the country is "change" (Slepukhin, 2005). In their opinion, the fact of structural reformation going on in the national higher education through the last decade completely justifies the conclusion that Russian academe has entered an absolutely new, post-Soviet phase in its progress and has become an organic part of the globalization process (Grebnev, 2004; Kondakov, 2001; Smirnov, 2004).

However, the parameters of the conversion of the Russian academe from the Soviet to "neo-Russian" status on the level of a student's everyday life remain mostly unclear.

### *The joy of studentship: reasons to become a student*

Unlike a Western youngster, who comes to a decision about his or her future profession by the end of a college study program, Russian teens have to decide about future job occupation prior to entering the university. University admission system in Russia requires for each applicant to pick a precise academic specialization during the enrollment process. Russian college applicants do not enter a university, but they enter a certain degree program named a "professional specialty". Each applicant has to know exactly the name of the future profession associated with the degree program he/she enters. Once enrolled into a university, every Russian student actually signs up with the specific academic department and exact study program corresponding to the name

of the particular “professional specialty”. The Federal Government conducts the directory of those “professional specialties” and every higher education institution in Russia has a list of the specialties, it licensed to teach by the Ministry of Education. The only study programs allowed for instruction are those corresponding to the institutional list of specialties. There are “additional”, “preparatory”, “pre-higher education”, “post-higher education” and many other types of programs offered by Russian universities today, and many of them are for pay. But none of these “non-core” study programs could lead to a valuable educational certificate, until being approved by the Federal Ministry of Education as “professional specialties”.

Every Russian graduate has the name of the “professional specialty” written into a degree diploma in the most details, like “Engineer in Civil Building Construction” or “Teacher of Russian Language and Literature”. Unlike any Western university system, Russian higher education doesn’t aim to offer liberal academic knowledge to the interested individuals. It responds to the communal request for public vocational training in the professional fields selected by the state. This is stated very clearly in the Higher Education doctrine of the Russian Government (Fursenko, 2005). The very definition of higher education is formulated in the Russian legislation as “professional higher education”. Precisely as it has been introduced by the Soviet government in 1930-s when Soviet university system has been organizationally established (David-Fox, 1997).

As generations before him, Russian college applicant today has to rely heavily on his/her family in the most important decision-making of choosing a university. This conclusion could be derived from the following reality: young age (17 years old) of the most university applicants, who are in the Russian reality in fact the profession choosers; vital need for all male-applicants of that age to choose between entering any college or being drafted to the army; and practical impossibility for a Russian student to change the selected specialty after entering a university.

As a result, Russian youngsters actually rather follow the decision of the parents who can advice which profession to choose from their experience; who can subsidize this decision financially and socially through the friends in the academic circles; who can foresee the practical application of obtaining certain education credentials. Besides, higher

education doesn’t guarantee a better job or a good pay in Russia. Today, like in the old Soviet times, most working class jobs in Russia, which don’t require ANY education, as a miner or a construction worker, still pay 3-5 times higher salaries than even a Ph.D. possessor could get. The social prestige of the academic profession in Russia, which supposes to attract the cr me of cr me of the intellectuals, is also very poor (Smolentseva, 2002). Russian teens just follow the will of the parents and look for obtaining a university diploma rather than seeking for knowledge or searching for self-development. According to the Russian scholars (Ladyzhec, 1992), this Soviet tendency of motivation for the provincial college applicants, who form the majority of the Russian studentship, still prevail.

Nothing much changed in the application process or motivation rationale for a Russian student, who faces today almost the same application system as people of his age generations before. Reforms in national higher education brought a lot of uncertainty and possibly much more expenses to the Russian college applicants, because of the introduction of tuition in many colleges. Russian press frequently pronounces “tuition” as the vice of globalization, which promotes “Americanization of Russian university system” (Korovin, 2002; Kruhmaleva, 2001; Zaretskaya, 2001).

### Study process and its outcomes

In the West, it is a solemn responsibility of a student to form his own study program from the subjects suggested in a university curriculum. While, curriculum issues in every Western University are the matters of an institutional decision-making. In Russia, the student’s study process is still follows the rationale established during the Soviet times. Every degree or specialty curriculum is produced and approved by the Federal Ministry of Education, being uniformed and obligatory for all national universities. Russian government controls all academic matters of each university through the unified internal regulations established for all national higher education institutions in the format of “typical university rules” and “typical university charter”.

Russian students don’t have any control over the curriculum and have minimum decision-making about personal academic matters up to the moment of graduation. A student of Tourism and Hospitality Management specialty at St. Petersburg State University, for example, would study the same collec-

tion of courses, using the same basic textbooks as his peers at St. Petersburg Technical University or at St. Petersburg Economic Academy. And yet, it would be almost impossible for that student to transfer from one institution to another at will. Despite the fact, that the result of studying at any of those universities would be absolutely the same – a typical, state issued diploma of a specialist in tourism and hospitality management.

While a graduate of any Western higher education institution gets a degree issued by the university itself, all Russian university graduates receive a typical state issued qualification diploma. It means that a student of Polytechnic Institute from Vladivostok, enrolled into the specialty “Engineer in Heavy Metallurgy” would have the same curriculum and would graduate with the identical diploma as the student from St. Petersburg Industrial Academy, taking the similar study program. During the last few years, some variations, named “electives” or additional courses, appeared in curricula of some Russian universities. However, these courses are also established and approved on the federal level for the further dissemination throughout the country.

Formula of a typical curriculum still rules in the Russian higher education. This model becomes handy and logical only if we would presume that the goal of the modern Russian academia is still the same as in the old, Soviet times: professional workforce production for the national industry. Soviet terminology had a perfect definition for its university system – “the smithy of command cadre.” Individualism and personal decision-making does not fit such “educational conveyor.” The same way as creative thinking and independent opinion can’t be expected components of a soldier’s mentality.

## Conclusions

As in the old Soviet times, modern Russian university establishment has an obligation to perform “a production of highly qualified specialists to the nation”, which is identical to the motto of a soviet higher school. Russian universities are focused on the “proper teaching process”, but not on establishing an encouraging study environment. A teacher is a major vehicle of the education progress in a Russian higher institution, while a student is just “an object of teaching”, - a soldier who is simply supposed to follow orders, rules and requirements. Russian government sustains the traditional Soviet mission of the national university system, unified

and directed by the center academe emphasized on the production of workforce. The predominant majority of Russian academics are the subordinates of the state, hired by the government to teach and train for the “national good”, which is understood not as a public, but government task. Most of Russian academics could only dream being a community of intellectuals producing research and providing the optimal learning environment for the students.

The context of higher education in this organizational paradigm is Soviet in its nature and lacks personal, independent, and equal relations between students and teachers. A Russian university professor keeps the traditional role of a typical mentor, delivering the uniformed training that a student has to get in a certain, unified way and later report back at an exam for a credit. It is time for the reign of uniformed typical regulations to be replaced with the diversity of an individual decision-making. Russian academia could fully enjoy the progress of globalization only if the perpetuation of the Soviet administrative tradition would be completely discontinued.

The key parameter of success is the intensity of the student’s involvement into the decision-making about his or her academic matters.

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