

Reforming Russia's Higher Education System

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Between December 2010 and February 2011, members of Russian society were engaged in a discussion about a new education law, presented on the Internet on a special website. This was the second instance of an Internet discussion on legislation, following heated debates about proposed police laws on the same government website several weeks before.¹ The legal changes were shaped by the need for a new umbrella law to replace an older set of education laws, which have been amended many times in the course of the ongoing reform of Russia's educational system.

There are many problems at both the secondary and higher levels of Russian education. Russian schools are trying to adapt the old Soviet system of "polytechnical" education to the demands of a changing society. The former system was characterized by a deep study of science and math and the virtual absence of options for pupils, while the new situation requires high school graduates to possess social and decision-making skills and a better knowledge of the society in which they live. Incidentally, the state also wants to impose a larger dose of patriotic education, while the Russian Orthodox Church is lobbying to include Orthodox religious education.

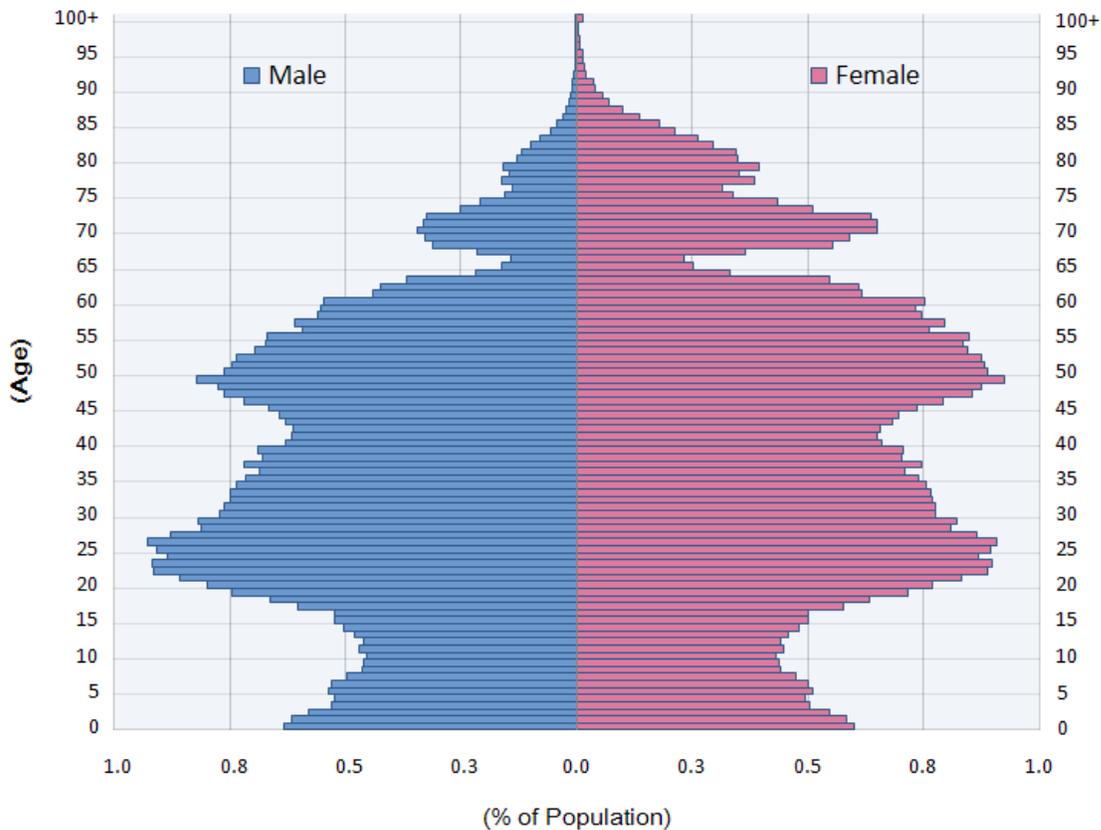
The most heated arguments underway, however, concern the future of higher education in Russia, which was acclaimed but is now in decline.

The Problems in the Education System

Almost all experts are unanimous in their verdict: the quality of Russian higher education is deteriorating. Communist politicians may blame reformers for "killing" the Soviet system of education that they call "the world's best." However, demographic decline itself, combined with growth in the absolute and relative number of students in society, leads to a loss in the quality of education and the creation of a large stratum of low-skilled college graduates with high ambitions whose characteristics do not correspond with labor market demands.

¹ <http://zakonoproekt2010.ru>

Population Pyramid of Russia, 2010



Source: Rosstat (<http://www.gks.ru>)

Russia's population trends (see diagram) demonstrate a dramatic drop in the number of Russian youth of student age (17 to 23). This is after steady growth across the previous two decades, when universities created new programs and opened new teaching positions, and new private universities mushroomed. After the demographic trend reversed, universities did not cut student slots accordingly, so now more students in the relevant age group are enrolled than ever before. This means, among other things, that the median level of student aptitude is today significantly lower.

The level of corruption in the educational system – in the narrow meaning of the term, bribes from students to professors or university administrators – is not, in our view, as high as some government or media report estimates. This is partially due to the overall lowering of quality control systems (i.e., examination requirements) introduced by the heads of Russian universities in order to keep enrollment numbers high. However, in broader terms, corruption is present at the advanced academic degree level; a "black market" appears to be flourishing, with politicians and businessmen "defending" theses they do not seem to have read, much less written. Such a trend waters down the "real" academic degrees of contemporary university professors and further destroys the integrity of the Russian educational system.

The Ministry of Education and Science at Work

State entities are trying to fix the situation. They go about this in multiple ways, making it hard to see the entire picture. Looking at the reform path, however, one can reconstruct the state's logic. Unable to reverse the trend toward universal higher education – a college degree for every Russian – the Ministry of Education is at least trying to restructure the field as follows:

- The main goal is to reduce the total number of universities and create a formal hierarchy of higher-education establishments. The creation of universities with special status – Moscow and St. Petersburg State Universities, federal district universities, and research universities – was the most significant recent step. When making these choices, the ministry was led by administrative factors (such as the desire to create a university in every Federal district) and scientific factors (i.e., the quality of scientific research was the key criteria for determining inclusion in the research network).
- To ensure the quality of education, the Ministry chose a bureaucratic path: it multiplied paperwork and report-filing for universities and professors and required comprehensive sample lectures to prove the quality of teachers' work.
- In 2003, the Russian higher education system joined the Bologna process (European standards that resemble the U.S. system). This led to the appearance of Bachelor's and Master's degrees instead of Soviet-type, five-year Specialist degrees. Introduction of these new degrees also appeared to serve the purpose of imposing a higher-level MA program above the masses of BA-receiving students while enabling the ministry to choose which universities could continue to offer graduate-level instruction while others lost that option.
- Finally, the Ministry of Education introduced a system of universal examinations for all high school graduates, the *Edinyi Gosudarstvennyi Examen* (EGE), which has been introduced as the sole basis for deciding university enrollment. The idea behind this innovation was to help fight corruption during entrance examinations.

University Administration

Let us now assess the government reforms from other stakeholders' points of view. By creating different levels of universities – federal, national research, and “other” – reforms can ruin scientific schools, especially in the social sciences and humanities. New research universities, selected for their hard sciences, often possess no qualified sociologists, historians, or linguists. The country's leading school, Moscow State University, has an infamous sociology faculty, which has seen one scandal after another, while second-ranked St. Petersburg State University has problems with its history faculty. On the other hand, some universities with decent humanities or social science departments, but with no big scientific departments, will be placed in the “other” category, perhaps with the possibility, as universities fear, of being shut down.

The reforms being discussed could also leave some regions without the highest levels of education, which may cripple them in the future. This problem is closely connected to the low mobility of faculty and student populations, something that has many causes including high relocation costs and the lack of a tradition in many Russian universities of hiring outsiders to teach.

The EGE, while reducing corruption pressures on university personnel, has also highlighted differences in control over implementation in different regions of Russia (several republics, for example, demonstrated well beyond average or even statistically impossible results). Moreover, the exam has made it more difficult for universities to admit extraordinary students as it does not allow for creativity; the universities have no discretionary powers to take this or other personal achievements into account.

Professors

University professors suffer from underpayment. If the economic crisis and constant budget deficits of the 1990s made low levels of income bearable at that time, in the 2000s, with growing societal and governmental wealth, the level of faculty compensation made it clear to professors that their work is not respected by the state. Just recently, both President Dmitry Medvedev and Prime Minister Vladimir Putin promised a starting salary for lieutenants (the first rank of military and police officers) of 50,000 to 80,000 rubles per month (\$1,800-2,800), while full-tenured professors at the provincial university level receive a salary of about 15,000 rubles (\$500), with teaching assistants receiving only 5,000 rubles (\$160).

This underpayment is the single most important reason for young graduates to not choose academic careers in Russia, and to prefer working in civil service or business, or even to emigrate. No young graduates want to make a career in the sciences or academia at large, since this basically leads to poverty. As a result, the quantity of younger faculty members decreases and the quality of education deteriorates.

Another problem caused by the ongoing reforms is the dramatic increase in paperwork at every level: the government tries to stop the fall of educational standards by increasing its control, which takes the form of additional paper workload. The Bologna reform requires significant changes of curricula that also lead to additional paperwork (and there is no compensation for the extra paperwork time burden).

Students and Future Employers

The reforms taken within the context of the Bologna process put the Russian educational system somewhere in between standards, making it some kind of hybrid that is worse than both variants – Soviet and American/Bologna. The BA level was not changed to include a wider range of options, which would help students choose their profession. A Russian BA curriculum looks like a shortened specialist program.

Thus, a student can enter a law department from the very first year of university, graduate with a BA in law after four years, and, say, continue for another two years to receive a MA in law. According to the current regulations, a pupil can switch to another

program – and get an MA in history without the basic core training that other historians receive during four years of broader undergraduate education. From both student and employer points of view, it makes no sense to offer four and six years of education in the same specialized program – and even less sense to change from four years of a BA program to two years of MA-level work in a very different field.

Moreover, the demographic downturn and rigid link between the number of students and budgetary funds available for universities has led to a virtual ban on student dismissal (or at least introduction of highly complicated procedures for it). This both increases professors' workload and decreases the quality of study.

There are also signs that portions of university students have begun to be viewed by some government bodies – such as the section of the Ministry of Internal Affairs that deals with “extremist” activities – as potentially dangerous (reminiscent of 1968).

What Shall be Done?

The picture looks rather gloomy, but it is also clear that the situation must be changed radically. At least two significant assumptions must influence the reform decisions. First, Medvedev's goal of “modernization” cannot be fulfilled without high quality professional education. Recent attempts (in Skolkovo and the like), while imperfect, demonstrate a will to work in that direction. Second, there is also an understanding that university-educated professionals strive to build civil society networks, which may become a major base for any broader civil society in Russia.

Possible solutions should start with smart decisions that involve input from society. Funding should also be increased; if Russia needs to improve education and the sciences, the structure of the state budget should be changed to dramatically increase the wages of professors. The coming election cycle creates the possibility and incentive for the state to take the initiative.