

Liberal Arts and Sciences in the Russian University Education System

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Abstract. The paper investigates the key specific features of liberal arts education: individual educational paths for each student, interactive teaching strategies, development of cultural competence (basic learning and research skills, breadth of education), develop-

ment of professional competencies and selection of majors, as well as curriculum interdisciplinarity and customizability. Having analyzed the experience of the SPSU Faculty of Liberal Arts and Sciences, we conclude that this educational model helps assure a high quality of education that meets the top international standards.

Keywords: higher education, liberal arts education, individual educational paths, interactive teaching strategies, internationalization of education, Faculty of Liberal and Sciences at St. Petersburg State University.

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The Faculty of Liberal Arts and Sciences of St. Petersburg State University (SPSU) is only four years old, but this educational program can already boast quite a substantial history. The new faculty was set up based on the Smolny College of Liberal Arts and Sciences educational program. The first admission to the College occurred in 1999. That was also when an educational standard for the corresponding domain of Arts and Humanities was developed and approved. The program offered Bachelor's and Master's degrees in Arts and Humanities. The first graduates completed the program in 2003. Graduates normally get two diplomas, one from St. Petersburg State University (Bachelor of Arts and Humanities) and another from Bard College, SPSU's partner in the United States (Bachelor of Arts).

The introduction of the program was supported by Dmitri Likhachev, member of the Academy of Sciences. In his letter to the Russian Minister of Education, he pointed out that "a program for training Bachelors of Liberal Arts and Sciences rests not only upon the modern achievements of foreign higher education, but, in the first

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place, it advances organically the best Russian traditions of university education, including those which, unfortunately, we have lost because of the dramatic cataclysms that swept through our country in the previous century.”

The tradition of liberal arts and sciences forms the foundation of the European university since the time of its origin in the Middle Ages. Of course, the original system hasn't been preserved unchanged. Today, liberal arts education or, in other words, liberal education, is perhaps the most demanded model at the first stage of higher education—Bachelor's degree. The phrase “liberal arts and sciences” is associated first of all with private American colleges—quite prosperous, by the way—but the liberal arts model also serves the basis for Bachelor's degree programs in large US research universities ranking at the top in the international ratings (e. g. taking 16 of the first 20 positions in the *Times Higher Education World University* rankings). Moreover, liberal education should not be confused with liberalism in the political sense.

The modern model of liberal arts and sciences is based on the traditions of classical university education, which evolved around the medieval system of “the seven liberal arts” (from the Latin *septem artes liberales*). It was comprised of two cycles: 1) the trivium (from the Latin *trivium*), i. e. grammar, rhetoric and dialectics, and 2) the quadrivium (from the Latin *quadrivium*), which consisted of arithmetic, geometry, astronomy and music. The cycles represented a medieval version of the system of knowledge that had been developed back in ancient times.

The distribution requirements intrinsic to the modern liberal arts and sciences model is one of the pivots securing historical continuity of the model with “the seven liberal arts’ education. The distribution requirement is an essential pre-condition for the fundamental nature of education, which is a key qualitative characteristic of the classical university education model. The curriculum delivered at the Faculty of Liberal Arts and Sciences offers a new balance between the breadth of knowledge and the depth of proficiency in specific areas of expertise to meet contemporary requirements.

Created within a classical Russian university, the Faculty of Liberal Arts and Sciences opens up unique opportunities for introducing and advancing new approaches to content development and overall organization of higher education, as well as new formats and methods of teaching. These efforts aim at supplying the university with more effective and up-to-date tools and methods to achieve its timeless goals of teaching students reading, writing, speaking and thinking.

1. The key specific features of liberal arts education

The liberal arts and sciences model has some key specific features: individual educational paths, interactive teaching strategies, development of cultural competence (basic learning and research skills,

breadth of education), development of professional competencies and selection of majors, curriculum interdisciplinarity and customizability. Let's now dwell on these specific features in more detail.

Individual educational paths. Every student studying according to the liberal arts model has an individualized curriculum, in which about 70% of courses (from 50% up to 90% across universities) are selected by the student. To prevent such freedom of choice from turning into irresponsibility and customized curricula from becoming chaotic, each student is assigned from the very first days a supervisor/academic advisor from among the teaching staff, whose job is to help the student build an educational path that will best tap their potential. However, the supervisor's role is only advisory, they should not obstruct students from learning to make independent decisions through having to make such important choices at the very beginning of the educational process.

Interactive teaching strategies. The importance of interactive teaching methods is growing with the rapid increase in the amount of information available to us today in any area of expertise. Liberal arts education pays special attention to the diversity of the teaching forms that suggest student involvement and activity.

Development of cultural competence implies, first of all, development of basic learning and research skills and, second of all, breadth of education as the core principle in developing a curriculum consistent with the liberal arts and sciences model.

Courses compulsory for all students are supposed to develop a series of basic learning and research skills with emphasis on critical reading and writing competencies. Critical reading courses are usually referred to as the First-Year Seminar or the Great Books Seminar in US colleges and universities, while the SPSU Faculty of Liberal Arts and Sciences is now offering the Basics of Humanities course. A special-purpose Thinking & Writing intensive course is arranged for newly enrolled students; besides, consistent enhancement and diversification of writing skills is provided at all subsequent stages and levels of education.

Fulfillment of distribution requirements in the form of specific requirements for students may differ across universities. The SPSU Faculty of Liberal Arts and Sciences has eight requirements of the kind:

- Philology: courses aimed at studying the general properties of languages and texts, including literary texts.
- Visual Arts: courses in history of fine arts and architecture or in history of cinema, aimed at studying the general properties of visual languages.
- Music: courses giving the idea of the specifics of musical language and artistic performance.
- Philosophy: courses where students learn to interpret sophisticated philosophical texts.

- History: courses aimed at studying the uniqueness of historical phenomena and teaching source criticism (this category also includes some courses in anthropology, economic history, etc.).
- Social Sciences: courses in sociology, anthropology, political sciences and economics with emphasis on the structural theoretical approach to study of social phenomena as well as on social research methods.
- Mathematics and Information Technology: courses providing a knowledge base sufficient to use quantitative methods in various fields of humanities and social sciences.
- Modern Natural Science: primarily theoretical courses to introduce students to the paradigms of reasoning in contemporary natural science.

The names of the requirements, which are similar to the names of the traditional academic disciplines, may be misleading. It is not about a rigid list of eight compulsory disciplines but about the competencies behind these names, so each of the requirements can be fulfilled through one of a whole set of relevant introductory level courses. Variability and choice are available here, too.

Development of professional competencies and selection of majors. In today's employment market, graduates of higher education institutions tend to lack the competencies that employers demand. The market wants, first of all, people with the ability to learn rather than those possessing certain narrowly specialized skills. This is why higher education has been divided into two stages, i. e. Bachelor's and Master's degree programs. However, we lack Bachelor's degree programs that would provide efficient basic training. Development of such programs is what we are talking about. It does not mean that the liberal arts model ignores professionalization completely. It doesn't, and, importantly, professionalization exists within the framework of one curriculum, in the form of majors. The SPSU Faculty offers 14 majors today, but this is absolutely not a limit—Bard College offers over 40, for example. Bard College majors cover virtually all basic areas of knowledge, from life and exact sciences to practical arts (which is typical of liberal arts and sciences programs). The basic academic load in each major is fairly small (no more than one third of the total load), and students only make their final choice after one or even two years of studies. Surely, a student won't be able to acquire narrowly specialized skills in such courses, and the very process of education looks superficial at the first glance. But at the same time, this drawback brings about a significant advantage: being already "inside" the educational process, the student has a chance to make a much more conscious choice of major and build a much more flexible educational path.

Curriculum interdisciplinarity and customizability. A distinctive feature of liberal arts education is that it trains professionals armed

with knowledge in both humanities and sciences. For this purpose, the SPSU Faculty of Liberal Arts and Sciences created the Department of the Problems of Convergence in Natural Sciences and Humanities headed by Professor Tatyana Chernigovskaya, Sc.D. in Biology and Philology. The basic core programs offered at the Department are Cognitive Studies and Complex Systems in Nature & Society.

The Cognitive Studies program covers such fields as linguistics, psychology, neuroscience, philosophy, anthropology, and artificial intelligence studies. Specialists dealing with these areas of expertise study how man cognizes the world, how human consciousness and subconsciousness work, how the human brain affects perception, whether it is possible to create robots behaving like humans, whether there are genes influencing intellectual and linguistic competencies, etc. Students acquire skills in various fields: linguistics, semiotics, psychology and neurophysiology.

The Complex Systems in Nature & Society program is also designed to train experts capable of working across sciences. The developing modern society and the thus emerging new challenges require not only traditionally trained specialists but also “experts in problem solving”. It means that interdisciplinarity based on the complexity theory will be demanded by education, the academic community and the job market.

An important component of these major programs is the active involvement of students in research activities even at the level of Bachelor’s degree studies.

Student research activities normally suggest a research degree in the first place, or at least a Master’s one. In this context, it is worth mentioning the experience of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences at Princeton University that launched the Integrated Science program for 1st and 2nd year students several years ago. The format of liberal arts and sciences integrates biology, physics, chemistry and computer sciences and gets the student involved in the current research projects as early as at the very beginning of studies. The graduates owe their success to the genuine and substantial interdisciplinary nature of the program.

The President of Princeton University has recently said that liberal arts educational institutions undertake two completely differently vectored missions: they train future scholars and people versed in sciences. According to her words, liberal arts programs have always included sciences. The programs are not reserved to liberals and artists as many tend to think. As practice shows, postgraduate studies in natural sciences and engineering are pursued more often by graduates from the leading American colleges of liberal arts and sciences than from the most prestigious private research universities. The success of liberal arts graduates is attributable to small group learning, motivated teachers and cross-training in sciences and humanities.

An important distinctive feature of teaching in the system of liberal arts and sciences is a more intensive and diversified individual work with students. Both supervisors/academic advisors and professors act in this case not as lecturers but rather as organizers of all student learning activities. Professors should develop ample learning guidance materials to support their courses, paying a lot of attention to reviewing written papers and monitoring student learning activities consistently. Modern electronic teaching support systems play an important role here. Sakai@SPBSU System was implemented by the SPSU Faculty of Liberal Arts and Sciences long ago and has so far proven to be efficient.

Teaching under the liberal arts and sciences model certainly requires lots of efforts, but it gives academic staff the opportunity to reveal their potential. Competition among professors increases as students select courses to build a certain set of competencies. When making their choice, students vote for specific courses, and professors have the ability to develop various programs of their own and thus have a unique opportunity to satisfy their creative ambitions.

2. The Experience of Liberal Arts Education at St. Petersburg State University

The SPSU Faculty of Liberal Arts and Sciences places priority on securing a strong interrelation between education and science and encouraging intensive research and development. Having a personal supervisor/academic advisor from the very first day helps students evolve into beginning researchers and often results in joint research projects. The Faculty encourages student participation in research teams. Thanks to the effort of professors and students, the Faculty holds about twenty international scientific conferences each year, offers nine regular open seminars and ten successfully functioning scientific centers and laboratories. Student and professor research and development projects have been supported by the Russian Science Foundation, the Russian Foundation for Humanities, the Russian Foundation for Basic Research, international foundations, Russian and foreign companies, as well as by resources of St. Petersburg State University. The intensive student and professor research and development activities result in numerous publications in peer-reviewed journals and monographs issued by the leading Russian and foreign publishers (nearly 200 papers have been published since the beginning of 2014).

The Faculty was one of the first to start actively using financial endowment as a financial support system, which is something new for Russian education. Investments made by large businesses in the endowment fund of St. Petersburg State University to support liberal arts programs show that the Russian business community recognizes the long-term benefits of this educational model. The endowment fund helps support highly qualified professors, academic mobility programs and talented students from all over Russia.

Russian universities show a high interest in the liberal arts and sciences model today, particularly to the experience of St. Petersburg State University. Over fifteen higher education institutions have already been licensed to conduct educational activities in Arts and Humanities. Of course, not every university is able to implement this educational standard on a full scale. In a number of cases, educational programs launched are limited to a narrower disciplinary segment, which covers, above all, arts and culture. However, there are also full-scale initiatives, like the project designed to create a multi-disciplinary Bachelor's degree program in the Russian Presidential Academy of National Economy and Public Administration. The SPSU Faculty of Liberal Arts and Sciences submitted a proposal to create a separate group of majors called Liberal Arts and Sciences to the Ministry of Education. Obviously, the title "Arts and Humanities" does not fully reflect the specifics of the broad interdisciplinary curriculum delivered at St. Petersburg State University.

Many higher education institutions contact the SPSU Faculty of Liberal Arts and Sciences asking for advisory and methodological assistance in introducing this education model. In order to inculcate liberal education strategies, the Faculty has developed, approved and launched a supplementary advanced training program for professors.

The internationalization of Russian education is undoubtedly a key priority today. Over the last two or three years, the Faculty has managed to expand exchange programs significantly. Today, one third of the Faculty students spend a semester abroad. Such expansion of student mobility has been provided partly by the delivery of certain courses in English (slightly more than 10% of all courses), which makes it possible to constantly increase the number of foreign students coming under exchange programs and to devise different formats of their integration into the SPSU educational process, depending on their level of proficiency in Russian. The Faculty is determined to increase the proportion of courses delivered in English up to 25% in the foreseeable future.

Only a relatively small percentage of university graduates work in their fields of study. An average employee changes eight jobs throughout their career life. Liberal arts and sciences education develops the competencies demanded in the dynamically changing market of today. Each of the majors at the SPSU Faculty of Liberal Arts and Sciences offers quite traditional career guidance with a view, in the first place, towards prospects for academic advancement. Yet, this type of Bachelor's degree studies attributes special importance to development of special projects and programs to attract potential employers and establish collaboration between the university and the employment market. It is about what is formally included in extra-curricular activities but is of paramount importance for the success of future graduates—the work of career guidance centers. Indeed, about one third of Bachelors decide to take a break in their studies after

completing the program in order to gain some real-life experience. It would be a fallacy to think that this strategy is mostly selected by academically unsuccessful graduates. Rather, it is the preserve of self-starters, specifically graduates willing to start up their own business. At the Faculty of Liberal Arts and Sciences, this employment sector is referred to as creative industries.

The fifteen years of developing liberal arts education in the Russian university system allow us to conclude that this model helps assure a high quality of education that meets the top international standards. Graduates of the SPSU Faculty of Liberal Arts and Sciences succeed fairly well in various practical domains, such as arts, banking and finance, media and journalism, government affairs and politics, science and education, gallery business, tourism, etc. They are also highly competitive when building their academic careers. Most of the Faculty graduates have continued their education, advancing to the higher levels of Master's and postgraduate degrees—not only at St. Petersburg State University (where they can be found at more than half of the faculties, from the Faculty of Arts to the Economic Faculty) but also at other leading universities in Russia and abroad. The Faculty's experience can be successfully shared and is going to be in demand as it offers practical solutions to attain the objectives pursued by Russian universities that seek opportunities for renewal and reform.