

Prospects for Liberal Arts Education Development in Russian Universities

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Abstract. In this paper, we analyze the model of liberal arts (“liberal arts and sciences education”, in the Russian tradition), one of the most popular versions of the comprehensive academic reform designed to solve a number of problems

in higher education: overcome the disciplinary specialization crisis, increase the demand for university graduates in the labor market, develop the sense of civic consciousness among graduates and transform the genome of *homo sovieticus* into that of *homo economicus*. We discuss the proceedings of the 2012 international conference devoted to liberal arts and sciences education in Russia and the world, identifying the strengths and weaknesses of the model in the Russian educational context. Finally, we analyze expected outcomes of introducing the liberal arts education, forms and methods of such introduction, and viability of the model in the Russian context.

Keywords: higher education, liberal arts and sciences education, labor market, interdisciplinarity, interactivity.

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We appreciate the attendance of Jerzy Axer, MA in Classical Philology, founder of the unique interdisciplinary Faculty of “Artes Liberales” at the University of Warsaw and author of a liberal arts education conception inspiring hope for a promising future of the whole model, at the Liberal Education in Russia and the World conference in St. Petersburg.

The liberal arts education concept is one of those phenomena whose media effect is directly proportional to their ambiguity. Both adherents and opponents of the innovation describe its importance in terms ranging from *Copernican revolution* in education to sort of a *conservative revolution*, i. e. restitution of the well-forgotten (either in Russia or globally) patterns of elite education (Tsarskoye Selo Lyceum, Ivy League universities, etc.). There have even been blatantly grotesque attempts to perceive transition to liberal arts education as a globally significant historic event and associate it with such tectonic (though absolutely uncreditable historically) processes in Western intellectual history as the “revision of the Aristotelian category system in the 1970s’ (*sic!*). It goes without saying that the category of “liberal arts”, as used by its contemporary proponents, is only homonymic to

its medieval prototype, as the liberal arts concept with its free curriculum and academic democracy couldn't possibly have less in common with the medieval university based on the primacy of commentary and the *ipse dixit* principle.

The early 2000s witnessed a surge of interest in liberal arts education, which had been practiced in some top-tier U.S. colleges for decades (the first association of universities supporting the model was founded in 1915). There were also attempts to introduce principles of liberal arts education in universities all over the world, from Germany and Netherlands to South Africa, Palestine and Kyrgyzstan. Quite naturally, the project evolved very diversely across the countries with totally different education and cultural traditions, economies and political regimes, but the fundamental features were preserved.

Liberal arts education research has an extensive history rich in versatile methods. The publications range from rather solid sociological investigations which, however, present little interest for the broad public [Hersh, 1997], to such exotic studies as, for instance, Bonnie Urciuoli's *The Semiotic Production of the Good Student: A Peircean Look at the Commodification of Liberal Arts Education* [Urciuoli, 2014]. Neither is it rare to find "participant observations" performed by academic functionaries and poised between research, executive summaries for superior authorities and exchange of experience with colleagues. A separate category includes politically and emotionally charged texts describing the attitude of "liberal arts" towards such large-scale phenomena of personal and social life as religion or war [Buttrick, 1947; Hritzu, 1944]. Experts in different disciplines express regularly and consistently their personal attitude towards the new format of academic life, both from protective (protection of disciplinary boundaries) and interdisciplinary perspectives. Another isolated trend is represented by works within the framework of postcolonial, or regional studies, which focus on prospects and outcomes of introducing liberal arts in various local contexts [Nesin Omatseye, 1982; Barnett, Symons, 2001]. There have also been some attempts to embed liberal arts education in the "great narratives" of the university tradition or in the "university ideas" in a Newmanesque or Humboldtian way [Bradley, 1985]. All of these research approaches, including those that use actively the mathematically implied rhetoric of objectivity, are welded together by considerable axiological load, the category of *value* being invariably a constitutive part of the conceptual framework in every text. One also cannot fail to notice the significant role of liberal and alarmist rhetoric which is conspicuous to everyone who reads regularly journals of higher education (*The Liberal Arts Curriculum and its Enemies, Are the Liberal Arts an Endangered Species?*, etc.) [Ragan, McMillan, 1989. P. 682]. In this context, research and op-ed pieces become laboratories elaborating a language for institutional legitimation (according to Berger and Luckmann) of the liberal arts in order to help them find their place in the

market. Some seek inspiration from the Second Vatican Council Fathers and go sometimes as far back as to the Ancient Greek sophists in their search for rhetorically efficient methods of liberal arts marketing theorizing [Ibid. P. 686]. It can be generally agreed that the research field of liberal arts is mostly filled with pragmatism and marketologist rhetoric, the latter bordering sometimes on messianism.

The *Liberal Education in Russia and the World* conference¹ held on October 4–5, 2012 in St. Petersburg was jointly organized by the Faculty of Liberal Arts and Sciences of State St. Petersburg University and Bard College (U.S.) managed by Leon Botstein, one of the most world-known liberal arts education ideologists. The proceedings of the conference provided the basis for reflections on the possibility, viability and profitability of introducing liberal arts education in Russian universities. When dealing with the talking points that were not supported by any extensive arguments in the conference, we resorted to the participants' publications and the interviews some of them had given to major Russian radio stations or print media. Judging from our own experience of learning, teaching and research activities in Russian and foreign universities, we apprehend that, despite its value, the idea of liberal arts education runs the risk of reinventing what was invented long ago and has even been more or less efficiently practiced, as well as the risk of producing a number of simulacra and pseudo-problems, when transplanted to the Russian (or, broader, post-Soviet) space.

In its most general, classical form, the liberal arts model embraces all the levels of university life, from education process to administration, from curriculum to forms and methods of teaching. Eliteness and the resulting high price of liberal arts education come from the combination of "intimacy" with the widest choice of courses and formats of classes. Meanwhile, courses should belong to different disciplinary domains, i. e. humanities should always be accompanied by exact and life sciences, so that there is no specialization, at least at the earliest (Bachelor's) stage of education. Classroom activities are few, and they are all interactive, with a lot of attention paid to independent student work and student initiatives as such, whether learning or social.

Liberal arts education programs have been launched in nearly twenty universities of Russia. The latter include the "giants' well-recognized nationally and abroad—such as St. Petersburg State University with their famous Faculty of Liberal Arts and Sciences or North Arctic Federal University—as well as small institutions that are of-

¹ See conference proceedings on websites of Bard College (USA) <http://www.bard.edu/liberaleducation/> and the Faculty of Liberal Arts and Sciences of State St. Petersburg University http://artesliberales.spbu.ru/events-en/afisha/news_12_10_4_5 (proceedings include a video report: http://artesliberales.spbu.ru/events-en/files/video_conf_12_10_4_5).

ten designed to prepare specifically people of art (Institute of Liberal Sciences and Arts in Moscow, Academy of Contemporary Art in Yekaterinburg, Vaganova Academy of Russian Ballet in St. Petersburg). It's no use comparing the life in "intimate" academies with that in the "flagships" and "icebreakers" of Russian education. However, despite all the differences among liberal arts education programs across universities, the *Liberal Education in Russia and the World* participants' reports demonstrate convincingly the essential solidarity between the developers and the implementers of those programs.

**Expected
Outcomes of
Introducing Liberal
Arts Education**

Even a mere enumeration of positive transformations expected to come with liberal arts education can make you think you're reading a manifesto imbued with utopian ideas. Yet, we need to admit that the statement of most lofty though pasteboard values gave way to quite pragmatic and realistic aspects in the speeches. This looks like a proof of liberal art education viability and profitability.

Most speakers associated the introduction of liberal arts education in Russia (as well as in the West) with the restitution of the civic, upbringing function of education that was lost in Russia with the collapse of the Soviet ideology. They also underlined the role liberal arts education plays in developing critical thinking and raising active and responsible citizens of a democratic society willing to participate in their country's political life. The idea was echoed by almost every speaker, being most clearly articulated by Dmitri Dubrovsky, Oleg Kharkhordin, Thomas Rommel, Andrey Zorin, Antonia Gohr, Kevin Hovland and Jonathan Becker (see also [Becker, 2014]). Liberal arts education has all the potential to develop tolerance and respect for other people, different viewpoints and cultures in students (Hovland et al.). There are several ways of actually promoting those principles in educational institutions.

First, the declared principles are incorporated into the content of education, which is inseparably associated with its objectives. As university is understood in liberal arts education as an agent of civil society, classroom teaching inevitably implies bringing any discussions to the level of global problems of mankind, such as environmental pollution, global warming, AIDS, racial and other types of discrimination. Some presenters also expressed an opinion that students learn first of all to develop their own points of view on specific issues. Becker's manifesto article makes it easier to see the roots of the way speakers articulated the education objectives:

Although liberal arts curriculum has recently been most often associated with literature and humanities, life sciences and mathematics have historically been integrated in this curriculum, being closely related to a number of major challenges the civil society faces today, whether it be dissemination of epidemics, famine

or environmental issues. If students have to participate in solving the important problems plaguing today's society, they should be adequately prepared to understand contemporary scientific theories and the use of quantitative methods in contemporary social sciences. [Becker, 2014. P. 19].

But wait, wouldn't this point give a déjà vu even to a graduate from a mediocre Russian university? Didn't curricula of each and all universities in Russia include courses in philosophy, political science, culturology or modern natural science? While discussing the incentives that could possibly prompt Russian consumers of university education to accept the idea of liberal arts, the conference participants mentioned again and again that the fundamental difference between the pseudo-interdisciplinary curricula of post-Soviet universities (i. e. those liberated from the party propaganda component) and the contemporary vision of "true" interdisciplinarity lies in the quality of faculty and teaching behind this interdisciplinarity.

Second, liberal arts education implies special forms of teaching and communicating with students. It promotes horizontal relations among students as they work in small groups and constantly review products of each other's efforts. Such forms of learning management are expected to encourage efficient development of communication skills, flexibility and tolerance.

Third, extracurricular activities in liberal arts colleges include abundant welfare activities: assisting school students, working for development aid agencies, teaching to disadvantaged people (specifically to adults and teenagers in custody) together with professors, etc. Many students devote 20–25 hours a week to activities like these.

Another backbone of the liberal arts education concept is the combination of market pragmatism and enthusiasm for an anthropological reform, i. e. the idea of great flexibility of college graduates in the face of the rapidly changing labor market demand coupled with the humanist ideal of *homo universalis*. Andrey Zorin mentioned the example of Oxford liberal arts college, whose students become professional musicians and start giving concerts long before graduation, while their curriculum includes Aristotle, for instance. The Renaissance ideal of liberal arts education finds tangible embodiment in the organization of university infrastructure: each university should have a library, a movie theater, gyms and other intellectual and physical development facilities, the very existence of which would motivate students for comprehensive self-improvement. Another déjà vu. Libraries have always been available not only in the best but even in mediocre universities of Russia, although the quality might have been different. Most universities have had their own art centers with various clubs and ateliers. Physical education is still a required course in some universities, and often a hated one, particularly in the form of the so-called General Physical Preparation (GPP). However, many

universities have been providing a wide choice of sport classes, from ballroom dance to swimming, from badminton to speed skating, regular attendance of which could yield credits instead of GPP.

Supporters of liberal arts education regard it as a way to bear down dehumanization of education and to overcome the “crisis of specialization”. The advantage liberal arts education has over the existing models is that it makes it possible to postpone the choice of specific occupation (imposed by the Russian education system on teenagers at a very early age) or even avoid it thanks to interdisciplinary programs at all stages of higher and postgraduate education, including doctoral degree. According to the experience of St. Petersburg State University, the impregnable interdisciplinarity of liberal arts education at the doctoral stage allows for a much broader range of studies. For instance, the Faculty of Liberal Arts and Sciences offers a series of forward-looking interdisciplinary programs as part of liberal arts education, first of all those in cognitive studies and contemporary art.

Postponing the moment of choosing a specific occupation becomes an important advantage in the context of total infantilization (which is the problem of the West even more than of Russia), when the threshold between adolescence and adulthood, or at least the age of some independent decisions, is pushed away further and further. In this situation, liberal arts education is nothing but a response to the demand for interdisciplinarity, which is common for most research fields nowadays. Meanwhile, if we approach the model from a more pragmatic angle, we will be able to see an efficient measure to resist the head-spinning changes in the structure of demand for occupations at the present stage of civilizational development. Occupations come, become trendy and go at a speed that was unthinkable 30 years ago. Not only in Russia—this is a universal tendency. Fewer and fewer successful people work in their fields of study. Instead, success today means being ready to change occupations and acquire ever new skills and knowledge. In such uncertainty, to the rescue comes the essential policy of liberal arts education: not just deliver a narrow range of knowledge but teach thinking, information processing and communication. Denis Akhapikin believes that liberal arts education in Russia will help alleviate the accumulating distrust towards education and knowledge as such. The very format of classes is consistent with developing student creativity and proactiveness. Fathers of liberal arts education recommend that classroom learning should be restricted to four hours a day at a maximum, so that students could devote the rest of their study time to working independently or in small groups. Adherents of liberal arts education see its ideal embodiment (unfeasible due to the price in most cases) in customized education for each student, paired with lifelong learning and continuing education (history of the concepts is described in [Ignatovich, 2013]).

The speakers believe that liberal arts education will put an end to the “production of disappointments” which are often experienced by people with higher education today. Realizing their high creative potential, former liberal arts students will not get lost if they have to give up their jobs or learn a new occupation due to some circumstances. This feature of liberal arts education is especially important for students of artistic universities, who sometimes have to study 3 or 4 years before they realize they made the wrong choice.

As liberal arts education implies special status of student personality and specifically friendly relationships of trust between students and faculty, it could help overcome the “abandonment syndrome” typical for first- and second-year students, especially those coming from elite secondary schools. Such students often suffer a lot of stress because of having much less attention and sympathy than they used to have at school, even more so if they live on campus. Psychological troubles like these can be offset by close communication with professors and intensive tutoring as distinctive features of the liberal arts education system.

Transformation of the Soviet anthropology is another challenging task to be solved by liberal arts education. Ilya Kukulín in his speech created a vivid (in its hopelessness) image of a person whose life choices are dictated by the need to allay any suspicion that the Leviathan State might cast upon them. Thus, *homo sovieticus* learns a narrow set of skills and considers it right and proper to work for the same company throughout their life because it makes them look trustworthy in the eyes of the state. Living inside their occupation makes them a cog in the state machine, that’s why they regard work as a more stable living environment than their own personal life; even the choice of a life partner seems less important and reliable than that of occupation. By choosing an engineering or scientific field of study, they feel involved in the course of state development as the course of progress—and faith in the infinite value of progress becomes their religion. This system of psychological priorities is inevitably reflected in the vision of career path even today, decades after the Soviet era was gone: people who changed their occupations in the 1990s and succeeded in totally new fields do not realize the cultural significance of the choice they made. The Russian society has never really adopted the idea that it’s the choice of occupation that can provide you with a great biography and a meaningful life. As Kukulín believes, ideas like this are inhibited by the image of the state, of the authorities that can “take what you love” at any moment. In this sense, liberal arts education plays the role of a “cure for the state”: you need to conquer your fears to learn to do what you can actually love doing.

Oleg Kharkhordin pointed out that “chronic capitalism” in Russia had produced rigid personalist systems, which made the society lose its trust in democratic institutions, including economic ones. Most students (just as the rest of Russian population) don’t believe

for a minute that honest competition can actually yield any results. This distrust and disappointments minimize their need for personal growth. Supporters of liberal arts education say it is capable of restoring the thirst for personal development and rational goal-setting skills in young people.

Many speakers stressed that liberal arts education develops the ability to make responsible decisions. Students engage in building their own curriculum, thus obtaining group responsibility experience. They also influence university life by playing a part in university management. Every student has to make choices through the period of studies, while tutors and professors teach them to take these choices seriously and foresee the consequences for their personal development. There is a general hope that a person who has learned to take responsibility for building their life trajectory at an early age will later be secured against major mistakes in their career.

Ways of Achieving Goals in Liberal Arts Education

So, in what forms should all these ideal goals be achieved in university practice? First of all—it was mentioned by all foreign colleagues—through destroying the “Berlin Wall” between faculty and students, i. e. through refusing from monologue lectures, promoting small-group classes, seminars, discussions, co-reading and group discussion of pre-read texts, practical and experimental classes outside the university. Yet, “small groups” mentioned by foreign speakers were supposed to include up to 30 students. Only the richest liberal arts colleges (like in Oxford) are able to offer courses for groups of 3 to 12 people, but this is a privilege only really affluent families can pay for. In reality, even the European professors the most enthusiastic about liberal arts education have to admit their institutions often can provide neither small-group education nor a sufficient number of optional courses, as they would have to charge students a questionably sensible price, provided that education of this type is “not quite feasible”. However, the solution exists: many of the courses students can’t take at their own university are easily available at other institutions, as liberal arts education involves student mobility.

In the Russian context, reducing student groups, encouraging student-professor communication and eliminating monologue lectures—what the foreign participants called for—are not something we should introduce. It’s something we should try to preserve, something we used to have plenty of, then less, and now it’s nearly brought to naught. Some of the elite Moscow universities, such as Moscow State University or Russian State University for the Humanities, provide Master’s programs for only 3–6 students signed up, and the same is true for some optional courses in humanities. Moreover, 20–25 years ago an optional course for five people was considered a norm not only in elite but also in average universities (e. g. teacher training ones). Department management had no objections to small

groups and included the course in the teaching load of the responsible professor. Even mediocre universities allowed transferring credits for courses taken at higher-class universities, which were happy to let enthusiastic visiting students attend the courses and take examinations for free. Today, Higher School of Economics cannot launch a course if less than 20 (for Master's degree) or 25 (for Bachelor's degree) people sign up. And, the minimum number of students in a course is going to be increased, not reduced.

As for credit transfers, students willing to become free-movers will sooner get mired in the bureaucratic hurdles than get their credits from another university approved and included in their transcript. Many participants pointed out that student mobility in Russia is impossible at least for "technical reasons", rather than anything else. Optional attendance is also impossible, although the practice didn't use to be limited to D students and truants two or three decades ago. Globally renowned scholars (which was a rare thing at that time) could announce at their very first lecture: "I'm only explaining the common things in these lectures. I understand there are those who know everything I'm going to talk about. Please don't waste your time, just come up and get the recommended reading list. And see you at the exam." Indeed, capable students interested in the subject who attended no lectures could perform much better at the exam than assiduous but less talented peers who didn't miss any lecture. The scenario is unrealizable today. The rules have changed in the disfavor of talented and enthusiastic people capable of managing their development, understanding their potential and taking risk when necessary. There was a very narrow doorway leading to the big world of university education and university freedom that burst open during the chaos of bureaucracy and everything else in the 1990s—and shut immediately down with the very first attempts to regain at least some order in the university education system. If today's situation had existed twenty years ago, with credits given for attendance, with no chance to study at more than one university (or other institutions)—and for no charge!—many of the Russian researchers who are working now in Russia and abroad just wouldn't have been able to obtain the education that made their achievements possible.

Liberal arts education is not only about student mobility but about permanent faculty mobility, too. This is a real opportunity to "unlock" Russian education both in the West direction (which guarantees attractiveness for students to some extent) and within the country.

Professors enhance their competencies by listening to their colleagues from universities with established liberal arts traditions; or, vice versa, they teach to colleagues planning to introduce liberal arts education programs (the "chain-like nature of professor training" was mentioned); finally, they "infect"—the word was used as a term—university management, faculty, students and active members of the education-concerned public with liberal arts education ideas. People

holding on to liberal arts education principles in their work should instill them in the institutions that don't have liberal arts education or even resist it stubbornly. As the conference participants believe, professors who master liberal arts education techniques compare very favorably with those using the conventional lecture-seminar system in the eyes of students. That is why raising awareness and ensuring communication of students with liberal arts education experts will gradually make universities adopt the model, as students "vote with their feet" preferring institutions with better education and more freedom.

The conference had a whole session devoted to creation of a confederation of universities providing liberal arts education. Such confederations already exist abroad, they are Association of American Colleges and Universities (AACU) and the consortium of European Colleges of Liberal Arts and Sciences (ECOLAS). An association of universities supporting liberal arts education is intended to perform most diverse activities: from studying liberal arts teaching methods and elaborating academic and administrative recommendations for universities willing to introduce the model to developing cooperation with like-minded international organizations; from monitoring student, faculty and public attitude towards liberal arts education to developing formats of cross-university interaction and support for student and faculty mobility; from creating platforms to exchange experience among universities (conferences, internship programs) to promoting liberal arts education in print media, both popular and academic. The speakers suggested that introducing liberal arts education programs in a networking regime (i. e. providing permanent contacts among educational institutions within the country as well as between Russian and foreign universities) would promote transformation of universities into agents of civil society. Institutions included in the network will be able to lobby education authorities and control decisions in some parts of the network. At the same time, adoption of liberal arts education will result in a dramatic growth of certain universities, including provincial ones—due to the ever closer collaboration with foreign institutions and to the regular stream of students and professors from partner universities—and, consequently, in growth of their reputation.

**Liberal Arts
Education as an
International
Project**

Advocates of liberal arts education join their efforts primarily to gain influence and political weight in the Russian and world arena, which is in keeping with the spirit of liberal arts education. The latter is not just a model of education but a whole complex of disciplinary measures designed to build a new liberal and tolerant society that would provide its members with free development opportunities throughout their lives. Therefore, associations of universities providing liberal arts education should contribute to social and political visibility of its agents. With joint efforts, it will be easier to demonstrate to authori-

ties and the public that the society has no other choice but to adopt liberal arts education. Indeed, many graduates of the conventional system with its rigid disciplines and niche specializations cannot find their place in the labor market, feel no job satisfaction and are unable to achieve professional or personal growth.

Of course, making liberal arts education in Russia part of the large-scale international project should be powered by a complete transition to English, which will become the language of instruction and also the language of communication on campus. This is already being done in a number of countries: Fried Keesen mentioned that Utrecht University didn't use Dutch at all, whether in classes or on campus, Dutch professors speaking English to Dutch students. Recognizing English as the primary language of liberal arts education will facilitate international academic mobility and attract student attention to programs offered by small countries with decent education but uncommon languages (e. g. Brazilian and Australian students have already been taking English-based liberal arts programs at the Catherine's College of Tallinn University).

Fluent English will definitely make a competitive advantage for liberal arts graduates in the eyes of employers, compensating for the certain peculiarity and eccentricity of diplomas. This competency is especially important for students of developing countries. Andrew Wachtel, president of American University of Central Asia (AUCA) in Kyrgyzstan, outlined the conception of his university². Students enter AUCA to learn a rather "pragmatic" occupation, like law or management. However, the university doesn't have those as it offers liberal arts education programs. Students don't study in depth any "pragmatically-oriented" disciplines, they only study "liberal arts". Yet, they understand, and so do their parents, that quality of education in the rest of Kyrgyz universities is much lower than in American University, at least because Americans talk to students in English exclusively throughout all the four years of studies (in all courses except history of Russian literature which is taught in Russian by Wachtel himself, who is a really good expert). By graduation, students speak English quite fluently, which gives them a huge competitive advantage in the Kyrgyz labor market, making up for the "eccentricity" of diplomas in the eyes of both employers and parents who pay for that.

Andrew Wachtel, as many other participants, argues that liberal arts education is aimed at teaching students communication skills. It rings the bell of the phrase regularly heard at cultural studies conferenc-

**Viability of
Introducing Liberal
Arts Education in
Russia**

² See also Andrew Wachtel's interview given to Radio Svoboda on September 4, 2015, in which he describes the implementation of liberal arts education principles in AUCA activities: <http://www.svoboda.org/content/article/26887314.html>

es: “It’s not sciences but behavioral flexibility and efficient communication that should be taught.” Right before our own eyes, the loftiest ideals of *paideia* join the sober-minded realization of the need to survive the competition. What does it mean to “teach student communication skills”? No doubt, raising a free individual with wide interests who is willing to be an active and responsible citizen is only welcomed, as well as raising a tolerant individual with team-working skills. Yet, the essential alienation from fields of study (which will inevitably happen as soon as any discussion is taken to the level of global problems of mankind) is viciously paired with the declared eliteness of such education. Won’t it result in the essential amateurishness, populism and demagogy (aka “efficient communication”) that will be labeled as “elite” competencies or even the “cure” for the society? To provide a “radical revision” of the Humboldtian model, is it enough just to drown it in the total interdisciplinarity and ubiquitous “epistemic interventions”, in which students will plunge long before they even learn what disciplines are, how they are to be studied and what was the point of the boundaries between them?

Needless to say, there are areas where liberal arts education can do nothing but good. On the one hand, there are artistic universities—schools of music, theater, fine arts—where students devote themselves fully to their artistic occupation and achieve a high level of mastery, while staying virtually semiliterate. Giving such students an opportunity to learn at least basic literature, biology and mathematics means enhancing their knowledge significantly and making them speculate on things they wouldn’t otherwise be able to come across. In this case, education performs its classical function of inculcating some interests a person would lack without it. On the other hand, there is a problem of decreasing interest for humanities as a field of study, i. e. for humanities education as a path to a successful career. If an expert in Ancient Greek decides to work in their field, they will find it very hard to find a job; and even if they do find one, the salary will be extremely low. The lack of social demand for humanities graduates is slowly washing a range of subjects out of university curricula. That’s where liberal arts education steps into the breach, allowing universities to preserve not only the courses but also the traditions they have been part of, sometimes throughout the centuries-long history of the university existence. Leon Botstein cited the example of Stanford University: when it was time to weed out the unpopular disciplines, the professors started developing joint courses to be attended by all students. This way, they managed to save the classical component of education in one of the most prestigious universities of America. The speakers were hopeful that liberal arts education could work just the same for Russia.

Alexei Kudrin noted that liberal arts education was suitable for teaching transdisciplinary thinking and independent thinking skills—and this can also be considered an upside of the model, provided that

a lot of time and effort is invested by the entire faculty. And of course, the very idea of learning humanities, exact and life sciences in equal amounts at least during the first years would seem quite a lure for anyone with an eclectic range of interests.

However, let's think for a moment how liberal arts education principles can be implemented in the context of Russian education. Almost all participants of the conference agreed that liberal arts education is very expensive. Universities will find it unprofitable to maintain a full array of elective courses even if very few students sign up for some of them. It is also unprofitable to provide "interactivity", i. e. small group teaching, detailed reviews on every student work, and even tutorship and alternative forms of classes when necessary. Students and their parents, at their turn, find it costly to pay for, as Sokolov put it, the "demonstrative consumption of idleness", which is probably the genuine cause of the success graduates of liberal arts colleges achieve in life. It has become commonplace in sociology to admit that success of graduates belonging to specific social strata doesn't come from their individual skills, whether they be in further mathematics or secrets of "efficient communication". Connections inherited from the family or social stratum or acquired through communication with other people from the same stratum (first of all at the university) provide a much better guarantee of career success than even the most demanded competencies or the most powerful potential for self-development.

In Russia, the opportunity to choose from a wide range of disciplines belonging to essentially different domains often doesn't produce "universal people". Instead, it results in attempts to use the "backdoor" to get into the fields of study generally associated with prestigious jobs and decent salaries in the public mind, such as economics, management or law. Students who don't obtain enough points to get enrolled in public-funded places in economics or law but can't afford to pay tuition fees grudgingly decide to get free education at much less popular departments (philosophy, history, sometimes philology or history of art). In the course of their studies, they try to take at least three or four courses they believe will boost their value in the labor market, once mentioned in the transcript. What we have as a result is a system of mutual hypocrisy: students enter prestigious universities and study "unnecessary" humanities to have a chance to get their foot in the door of more demanded occupations, while professors have to communicate every day with students who will readily give up humanities for a more "profitable" education at any moment (although it often turns out that students underperforming in entrance exams simply have no talent for economics or law even in the scope of humanities curriculum).

As for curriculum interdisciplinarity, it used to exist everywhere around the Soviet Union and it still exists in some universities and sometimes even flourishes. For instance, students of New Econom-

ic School in Moscow take interest and pleasure in attending humanities courses, and the professors, renowned scholars in their domains, are largely happy to communicate with these elite students (no irony). However, in a vast majority of cases Russian students in economics, mathematics and life sciences see humanities classes as some extra time to do their homework or just to relax. There are many reasons for that, from distribution of teaching load (professors usually teach non-major courses when they lack load at their own departments because their colleagues don't think they are skilled enough) to pragmatic orientation of students who have never actually had any interest for humanities. It must be admitted that the same is most often true for humanities departments when they try adding economics or mathematics as required courses (in particular, philosophy students of HSE humanities departments complain regularly about being unable to pass a math exam, while history students get expelled from time to time after failing economics).

Taking into account the national university teaching standards—700 hours/year for associate professors and about 800 hours/year for senior teachers—we can imagine what the requirement for “interactivity” may result in, provided that it involves not only personal interaction with students but also detailed reviews on student works, for instance. Quite naturally, it will result in another increase in working hours for the same meager salary. Yet, free students need a more or less free professor who has enough time for self-development and is able to set a good example for students in this regard.

Finally, there is another reason to doubt the viability of mass adoption of liberal arts education in Russia. Russian universities have tried since long ago engaging students in welfare activities and raising them responsible and active citizens (no A student could get an honors diploma without welfare activities in their transcript), adopting interdisciplinary curricula (the number of “general development” courses in Soviet universities sometimes accounted for two thirds of the curriculum), equipping universities with movie theaters, clubs and sports facilities—everything that proponents of liberal arts education promote as innovations. We had it all, but everything worked poorly or not well enough to be efficient. Now, who can guarantee it will work better when introduced massively under the new name?

Nevertheless, the goal of introducing liberal arts education can be viewed from another angle—as a top-quality but over-priced product its manufacturers need to sell by extending their influence in the market and by invading more and more territories. The manufacturers believe strongly in product benefits as well as in their own potential—so they are trying to win the end consumer, which is quite natural in the labor market. One question was raised a number of times in the conference in St. Petersburg: how do we persuade students and their parents to opt for liberal arts education? The speakers considered appealing to the historical patterns enrooted in Soviet minds

that could play a role for Russian consumers (first of all the polydisciplinarity of Soviet curricula) and some present-day factors (e. g. the Bologna education system that can make liberal arts education coincide with Bachelor's degree period, or the number of creative-minded young people); they also discussed the places and methods of recruiting prospects of liberal arts education (all kinds of creative festivals were recommended), named the "enemies" of the model (education bureaucrats, scientists and professors who see no benefits of such education), as well as various social, economic and psychological factors that can impede the distribution of liberal arts education in Europe and Russia (educational standards, the wide-public vision of vocational education). It's always the question of marketing civil and universal ideals while admitting honestly the high price of marketing and the upper-class status of prospective consumers.

Summing up, we can single out the key unsolved challenges on the path towards successful introduction of liberal arts education in Russian educational institutions:

- ambiguous relationship between the notions of "mass" and "elite" universities generated by the ineradicable yet self-contradictory desire of every university to have as many students as possible while remaining "elite";
- consistent and fundamental reluctance to reflect (although reflections are claimed to be a priority) on the differences between educational and cultural background of "exporters" and "importers" of liberal arts education, which quite often results in reinventing the wheel and in adverse selection of innovations in education;
- excessive rhetoric and supremacy of the neoliberal ideologeme of "labor market" which makes the content of university education fatally dependent on external factors (competitiveness, quantifiability, popularity among consumers, etc.);
- uncritical acceptance of the "rational bureaucracy" mythology and faith in the omnipotence of managerial and administrative reform tools, the reforms being rather radical (eliminating the basic anthropological attitudes, building a civil society by means of liberal education).

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