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Author(s)	Piotr, Shalimov
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University Reforms in Post-Soviet Russia

Piotr Shalimov*
Russian Academy for Economics

Abstract — Before perestroika started, the whole system of Soviet higher education was under strict governmental control and regulations. The curriculum was designed by the state authorities with the approval of the Communist Party. Since the beginning of the 1990s, the Russian educational system has been on the stage of significant reforms and innovations.

Let us point out briefly the most important directions of these reforms.

1. Academic autonomy and freedom, which is guaranteed by state law. The control of the Communist Party and to much extent of the government over the content of education was abolished. Today's life of Russian institutions of higher education may be described in terms of pluralism and free search for truth.
2. Introduction and rapid development of private education at all levels of the educational system, especially in higher education.
3. Pluralism and diversity of educational institutions. Besides private universities and colleges, one can find such new (new for Russia) institutions as business schools, religious institutions out of the jurisdiction of official Orthodox church, national universities, international universities.
4. Internationalization of higher education. It is characterized by international programs and increasing numbers of international students studying both in Russia and abroad.
5. Planned development of universities. A special program is adopted to promote university development.

Summing up, the Russian system of higher education is on the way towards democratization and liberalization.

After the breakdown of the USSR, higher education in Russia is undergoing astonishing changes. Before perestroika started, the whole system of Soviet higher education was under strict governmental control and regulations. The curriculum was designed by the state authorities with the approval of the Communist Party. Professors who worked at universities could not offer to students their own original courses (with some exceptions in natural sciences programs). Even in such areas as mathematics, physics, chemistry and so forth, originally designed lecture courses had to be approved by partisan organizations. The curricula in the social sciences and in the humanities was overloaded with ideological subjects such as 'History of the CPSU', 'Scientific Atheism', 'Scientific Communism', etc. The higher education system was aimed to provide the country with high quality engineers and scientists who would help the Soviet Union to win the competition with the capitalist world on the one hand, and to educate people on the basis of Marxist-Leninist ideology on the other hand. The isolation of the outer world, the concentration of human capital in the military industry, the artificial differentiation of world science in 2 blocs (bourgeoisie science and socialist science), as well as separation from the world academic community were among the major reasons which caused a serious crisis in higher education.

The crisis in higher education was characterized by a decreasing quality of teaching, especially in the so-called 'provincial universities' (i.e., institutions of higher education located outside Moscow, Saint Petersburg and the capitals of the Soviet Republics). Intellectual and cultural resources were concentrated in the capitals, primarily in Moscow and Saint Petersburg, that, as well as better quality of life, forced gifted intellectuals to leave local institutions for these areas.

Highly regulated administration of education, planned admissions and graduations caused an enrollment crisis. Overproduction of engineers who received meager income and low social status lowered the level of students seeking courses leading to engineer-technical specialties on the one hand, while on the other hand, university entrance competition in the humanities increased substantially. There was also a shortage of institutes that offered courses in biotech-

*) Correspondence: Faculty of Education, Hokkaido University, Sapporo 060-0811, JAPAN

nology, informatics, microelectronics, management, sociology, psychology. The inefficiency of higher education was worsened by an out-of-date retraining system which, according to some calculations satisfied only 1 percent of the demand for retraining in new directions of science and technology.

Soviet nomenclatura (partisan and governmental bureaucracy) used the university system either for its own social reproduction, or for certifying its poorly educated part with diplomas from the institutions of higher education. Dragging and nepotism were widely spread in Soviet universities from at least the second half of the 1970s. The very idea of higher learning has earned certain unpopularity among non-intelligentsia social groups, because the average salary of university graduates was normally lower than that of industrial workers.

Hidden behind the 'iron curtain', the Soviet system of higher education could hardly meet the demands of internationalization and globalization arising in the modern world. All publications coming from abroad were strictly censored and, if not enter the requirements of official ideology, were put into libraries' special holdings, and became, unavailable for general public and hardly accessable by college students, instructors, researchers. The presence of foreign students in Soviet universities was mostly limited to those from socialist countries and industrially underdeveloped nations. Their contacts with Soviet students were minimized and they were highly concentrated in 'foreign student's reservation' called University of People's Friendship named after Patrice Lumumba.

Starting from the beginning of the 1990s, the Russian educational system is on the stage of significant reforms and innovations.

Let us point out briefly the most important directions of these reforms.

1. ACADEMIC AUTONOMY AND FREEDOM, WHICH IS GUARANTEED BY STATE LAW.

The control of the Communist Party and to much extent of the government over the content of education was abolished. Ideological subjects were removed from the university curricula. Special holdings in the libraries were opened to the public. Universities were granted the rights to decide the content of courses, to make necessary changes in curricula, to offer new courses, to relocate finances, to use their university facilities and research projects for budget raising purposes. Today's life of Russian institutions of higher education may be described in terms of pluralism and free search for truth.

2. INTRODUCTION AND RAPID DEVELOPMENT OF PRIVATE EDUCATION AT ALL LEVELS OF THE EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM, ESPECIALLY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

According to some statistics, in the year of 1994, which was the year of expansion of private education, private universities appeared every week and at the end of 1994 their number had grown about 200. Private institutions made higher education more accessable to people. Age limits, which were previously established at the age of 35, were eliminated in most of the private colleges and universities. In 1996, 700,000 students were admitted to all sorts of institutions of higher education, compared to 520,000 in 1992.

3. PLURALISM AND DIVERSITY OF EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS

Besides private universities and colleges one can find such new (new for Russia) institutions as business schools, religious institutions out of the jurisdiction of official Orthodox church, national universities (for example, German University, Jewish University, etc.), international universities (Pacific Coast University, French College, Japanese University). This institutional pluralism increased competition between universities while, future students (abiturienty) got a variety of alternatives. Diversity in higher education serves as one of the guarantees of freedom and basic human rights in post-Soviet Russia.

4. INTERNATIONALISM OF HIGHER EDUCATION

There are many international programs in modern Russian universities especially in the areas of business, management, finance, and public administration. Russian students get a chance to study abroad. At the same time, many Russian universities established special programs for foreign students coming to study in Russia. It means, at least, that Russian higher education is catching up with a trend towards internationalization which is clearly seen in the USA, Europe and Japan.

5. PLANNED DEVELOPMENT OF UNIVERSITIES

A special program is adopted to promote university development. This program includes 6 main directions: a) Universities as regional centers of education, science, and culture, b) Universities as fundamental research centers c) Universities as educational methodical centers of a multi-level education system, d) Integration of Russian Universities into the world system of university education and science, e) Development of universities under market-economy conditions, f) Universities' Scientific Park.

In general, the Russian system of higher education is on the way towards democratization and liberalization.