



"Communication is everyone's panacea for everything."

– Tom Peters

Dear colleagues,

This issue of The HSE Look is the final one for this academic year 2013-2014. It was not an easy year in terms of the political context we found ourselves in. I am sure, that in one way or another it influenced everyone's impressions of the past year. Despite of, or maybe as a result of this, there is a stimulus to enhance international communication in academia on both the personal level and in the field of scientific research and education more generally. Indeed, one thing we can do is to cooperate and produce as much fruitful and constructive joint work as we can to counteract whatever alarming events are happening around the world. We have dedicated this issue to the topic of constructive communication. We decided to talk to several generations of international faculty at the HSE and find out what this year was like for them. Sharing experiences is essential, especially as we are preparing to welcome new international professors and postdocs in September. I believe they will find it useful to learn about the experiences of their future colleagues who were once newcomers to the university.

Yulia Grinkevich
Director of Internationalization

Sailing to the End of the Year

We asked the professors that spoke to The HSE Look for this issue to cite a quote or a maxim that in their opinion can at best describe the academic year 2013-2014 as they experienced it. Below is what they shared.

Dr. Dina Balalaeva spoke about the brevity of time for a researcher and quoted Elbert Hubbard who said, *"The world is moving so fast these days that the man who says it can't be done is generally interrupted by someone doing it."* Dr. Anna Yurko characterised academic activity as a never ending quest. She chose to cite the words of Mark Twain, who said, *"Education: the path from cocky ignorance to miserable uncertainty."* Dr. Emiliano Catonini expressed somewhat similar feelings, and quoted Oscar Wilde to illustrate the general idea of academic achievement, who stated, *"There are only two tragedies in life: one is not getting what one wants, and the other is getting it."* Dr. Olga Baysha's research was deeply influenced by the recent political events in her native country, Ukraine, and she quoted Theodor Adorno, stating, *"In the end hope, wrested from reality by negating it, is the only form in which truth appears. Without hope, the idea of truth would be scarcely even thinkable ..."* For Dr. Eren Arbatli the year went very fast, so he describes it as "gone with the wind". Dr. Ruben Flores agrees and expresses the same thought in Russian: "Kak bystro letit vremya!" How fast, indeed.

A Fresh Start

Dr. Dina Balalaeva received her PhD in Political Science at the State University of New York at Binghamton, 2013. She spent this year at the HSE as a Postdoctoral Fellow and is starting her tenure track position at the Faculty of Social Sciences in September, 2014.

– What was this academic year like for you?

– Overall, it was a pretty successful year for me. I met wonderful people, finished some research, and started new exciting projects. I've got one preprint published on the HSE website and I got two pieces under review, with one of them being at the stage of "revise and resubmit". Besides, I went to several important conferences, including Public Choice in Charleston, USA. Next year I am planning to work on several interdisciplinary projects co-authored with my colleagues from other departments. I was contacted by an Assistant Professor from the Department of Economics after he found my preprint on the HSE website, and he gave me really valuable comments. As a result, not only was my own paper improved, but we also wrote a paper together, which we hope to submit to a journal this summer. So, this was a very timely project. I am also involved in several other research projects with HSE faculty members as well as other internationally hired colleagues.

– Did you enjoy working with students?

– I really enjoyed it. I was impressed by the level of knowledge of my students, especially of Math related disciplines e.g., econometrics, game theory. In general, students are really motivated here, they are interested in what they do. I was also a scientific advisor for four term papers and one Bachelor's diploma. It was a pleasant experience, and all papers were defended successfully. What I notice, though - and this is unfortunately an international academic trend - is that students are losing factual knowledge. They know theoretical concepts and how to test them, but they forget about facts. It is important to remember that in order to invent your own theory you have to know what is actually going on in politics. I hope to fill this gap with my own teaching.

Dr. Emiliano Catonini, an Assistant Professor at the International College of Economics and Finance, joined the HSE in 2013 after defending his PhD thesis at Bocconi University (Milan) and has been living in Moscow since then.

– What is your overall impression from your first academic year at the HSE?

– This is the first year that I am teaching as a professor and in general I am satisfied. My course in game theory attracted many students, although not all of them came with the right attitude. Master's students are very determined and focused. But, Bachelor's students are more difficult to interpret for me because they have very diverse interests and I have the impression that most of them don't really understand what they want. It may also be due to the fact that they are very young here in Russia, on average one or two years younger than in Europe I would say.

As for my research I didn't have much time for it in the first semester, because I had to start teaching, find a flat, get acquainted with Moscow, socialise and actively participate to the life of our department. We are a small group and I believe we need to participate in all activities, even if not in our research field. Now I have more time to achieve what I wanted to achieve this year in terms of research. I will use the summer for this, so there won't be long holidays for me this year. I am concerned with the publication of three theoretical papers that I started in Milan when doing my PhD. The work that I do takes a lot of care, time and focus. But, it is also the time to act quickly, because there is a competition involving one of my topics. My co-author in Milan and I are at the frontier, but we have to speed up.

– How did you feel about moving to live in Moscow?

– I find Moscow quite a comfortable city to live. There are nice parks, the weather is not as bad as they told me and it is predictable. I like the city as a whole, its architecture and its strong character. Moscow is unique in the world; it has a real Russian touch to it. I'd put it among the five most beautiful cities I've ever seen. It's not a tourist-friendly city, you have to fight here to get what you want, and this is one of the things that I like.

Dr. Olga Baysha is an Assistant Professor at the Faculty of Communications, Media and Design. She received her PhD from the University of Colorado at Boulder in 2012 and joined the HSE faculty a year ago.

– What have you been working on during this academic year?

– I have finished working on my book, "The Mythologies of Capitalism and the End of the Soviet Projects" during the academic year. It will be published in the fall. I have also been working on a couple of articles on the mythological imaginary of the discourses of modernisation and democratisation. Both of these papers analyse how various "progressive" social movements discursively produce internal "others" whose presumably "underdeveloped" intellectual condition is judged against an imagined scale of human progression. Next year, I plan to start writing another book that will continue investigating how progressive discourses, instead of liberating, can be employed to subjugate and to restrict freedom in its own name. Partly, my current work is inspired and informed by the tragic developments in Ukraine – my motherland. The citation you asked me to choose for this issue of The HSE Look is that by Theodor Adorno, it describes my research mood this year.

– What are your thoughts on being an academic and a resident of Moscow?

– In terms of personal feelings, this year has been extremely difficult for me. All my relatives live in the eastern part of Ukraine, which is in flames

now. What helped me not go crazy were my old Moscow friends, my new HSE friends and my students. I am absolutely impressed with HSE kids. Before Moscow, I taught "Communication in a Globalised World" at the University of Colorado at Boulder and Muhlenberg College, a highly selective liberal art college, so I am in a position to compare. I would make special mention of HSE students' intellectual curiosity, open-mindedness, critical judgment and general intelligence. It has been my great pleasure to share my knowledge with them.

Dr. Vladimir Panov, an Assistant Professor at the Department of Statistics and Data Analysis, joined the HSE in 2013 after defending his PhD thesis at Humboldt University in Berlin. Since 2014 Vladimir has been the head of the newly-founded International Laboratory of Stochastic Analysis and its Applications.

– What were your expectations for working at the HSE? What was fulfilled and what turned out to be different than you expected?

– In general, I can state now without any doubt that the HSE really differs from other institutions and I really enjoy my work here. Nevertheless, from my point of view, there are still some differences (both positive and negative) between the HSE and good European universities. First, during my first visit to the HSE, I was asked about my "dream-courses", courses I would like to teach. I proposed some courses that were quite new for the HSE — about Levy processes and about stochastic modeling. In other universities it takes some time to include new lectures in the program, and I was quite surprised about the positive response from the head of the department that I got in a couple of weeks. I appreciate that our administration has found possibilities to organise these courses already in the first year.

Second, the life in university is very dynamic. The HSE invites a lot of international specialists and this makes the scientific life on campus much richer. This year alone we have six new hires in my research field – mathematical statistics and stochastic processes. It is worth mentioning that four of them were hired by the International Laboratory of Stochastic Analysis and its Applications, a new division of the university created only three months ago. I have a general feeling that the university is really growing and this dynamic atmosphere sends positive signals to other international specialists looking for new positions.

– What do you miss at the HSE?

– What I really miss at the HSE is a good library with new books on my research interests. Such libraries exist in any European university, mainly because electronic resources do not cover all needs in information.

The Golden Mean

Dr. Udara Peiris received his PhD from the University of Oxford in 2010. He has been part of the HSE faculty for almost two years after accepting the position of Assistant Professor at the International College of Economics and Finance in 2012.

– What have you been working on at the HSE?

– Broadly, I am working on issues connected with macroeconomics and finance. One strand of my work is on monetary policy. I have two papers dealing with this issue: one on quantitative easing and another on nominal GDP-targeting, which is being pushed as an alternative to inflation targeting. Then the other strand of research I have is financial stability: I am looking at defaults and how this affects the macro economy. Part of my work here is teaching, of course. It's a valuable and incredibly fulfilling experience when students are really interested and engaged in what they study. There are times when students ask you

questions and it pushes your own understanding. Other times, however, I find students are very practical and pragmatic about the degree they are pursuing. This is true not only in Russia, but all over the world. They see a degree as just a means to getting a job. And I see this as a wrong and misinformed attitude. Many jobs in the financial and commercial sphere don't require an undergraduate degree at all: the knowledge from specialist certificates such as the "Chartered Financial Analyst" suffices. As a result, Higher Education will eventually return to what it was originally – an elite institution, a place where people go to develop their understanding, as opposed to knowing facts, which will push their careers further on, build a network and help formulate long-term flexible career goals.

– If it's not about finding a job, then what should be the goal of higher education?

– The goal is to give students the skills to interpret what is going on in the world, to understand what is happening in the commercial environment, if that's what they study. It's a way of thinking. Most people go through between two and three careers in their lives, they change their track completely several times. In the meantime they are also changing multiple jobs. This requires the ability to be able to interpret the way the world is changing and being flexible. This is really what the value of education is. It is disappointing when students don't really see this and fight against this sort of training. I find it quite strange if not disturbing that so many undergraduates are working full-time while pursuing the degree. The fact that so many students are working just shows what the whole attitude of the system is towards education, which is just a means to an ends rather than a way to help shape a kind of thinking.

Dr. Ruben Flores, an Assistant Professor at the Faculty of Sociology, has been at the HSE since 2011. Ruben moved to Moscow after obtaining a PhD degree from the University of Kent in 2010.

– How would you briefly sum up your experience at the university and in Moscow?

– I would say that my stay here has been both very productive and rewarding. As for my scientific work, I believe that some of my analytical categories and scholarly aspirations have become clearer. For example, I have gained a new appreciation for comparative analysis and some new developments in my work concern the comparative study of so-called "emergent societies". Besides, I have had the opportunity not only to develop as a scholar, but also to make some wonderful friends. I have also gained quite a few insights into Russian reality, language and history.

– What did you expect from the university and the city before coming here? How did things turn out in reality?

– Before coming here I was a bit worried that I would be isolated from the international sociological community, but actually the opposite has happened. Having colleagues from around the world has allowed me to experience different sociological perspectives and traditions. Beyond this, having the chance to attend conferences regularly, and to invite scholars from other countries to speak at the Faculty, has really made a difference in terms of allowing us to participate in a number of scholarly networks. Speaking of the city, Moscow is hectic, but it also has a lot of extremely pleasant corners. Not long ago I went to the wonderful botanic garden near Prospekt Mira, and I could hardly believe that I was not far from a busy road. I have also been surprised by how nice urban parks are.

Dr. Eren Arbatli, an Assistant Professor at the Department of Theoretical Economics, joined the HSE after finishing a PhD programme at Brown University in 2013. Eren's spouse and co-author, Dr. Ekim Arbatli, is an Assistant Professor at HSE's Faculty of Politics.

– What have you been working on during this academic year?

– This academic year went by quite fast. It was a busy and quite productive year for me. Besides teaching I was in charge of counseling economics majors interested in applying to graduate programs abroad. During the second half of the year, I had more time to focus on my ongoing research projects and attend conferences. My joint paper with Ekim Arbatli was recently accepted for publication. In the paper we show that interstate dispute participation has a mitigating effect on the likelihood of coup d'état attempts against a government. Another paper we worked on together is under review now. This paper lays out a theory of electoral campaigns where politicians systematically manipulate the information available to voters to gain an undeserved electoral advantage. After a long and tedious journey, we have finally arrived at the submission stage for a joint empirical paper with Oded Galor and Quamrul Ashraf on intra-population diversity and civil conflict.

– What are your plans for the coming year?

– During the summer and in the next academic year, I hope to make more progress on my projects that are at a more preliminary stage. For example, I hope to focus on research for which I obtained a grant from CAS. This is an offshoot from our aforementioned research on civil conflict. My goal is to explore various channels – both theoretically and empirically – through which the long-run legacy of the pre-historical exodus of humans out of Africa influenced the geographical distribution of diversity within modern human populations and how this might have influenced the potential for civil conflict. A rather new project that I started working on is about the history of regional development in Anatolia. This research will explore the economic, cultural and political heritage of the historical coexistence of different ethnic and religious groups over hundreds of years. This was a project I was thinking about for a long time. My collaborator Güneş Gökmen from the New Economic School and I are quite excited about this research because we hope that it will shed some light on a previously unexplored aspect of the economic history of our native country, Turkey.

A Word from an HSE "Old-Timer"

Dr. Anna Yurko, an Assistant Professor at the International College of Economics and Finance, got her PhD from the University of Texas in 2008. Since then she has been working at the HSE. In 2012 and 2013 she was voted by students as one of the department's best teachers.

– What is your general feeling about the academic year 2013-2014?

– This year I felt there was a normal working process going on. My general feeling about academic work on the whole can be illustrated by the quote that you asked me to pick for this interview. The one I selected was by Mark Twain, one of my favourite authors, who said that education is "the path from cocky ignorance to miserable uncertainty". It highlights the specificities of life in academia. However, the uncertainty is actually not only miserable, but also is a wonderful thing, full of opportunities. But there is some amount of misery in it – it's the constant feeling of dissatisfaction. The horizons of academic activity are very broad, so my colleagues and I permanently have that feeling that we could do better and more than we actually do. You always have this thought that what you do is not enough. Nevertheless, this is a positive feeling as it gives you stimulus to pursue further endeavors.

– Were there any changes in the direction of your scientific work since you joined the HSE?

– The sphere of my scientific interest has changed quite radically. I graduated from the PhD programme in Austin, Texas with a thesis on macroeconomics.

I was an expert in macroeconomics and industrial organisation. This combination of macro and micro is not very common – I was applying macroeconomic approaches to microeconomic analysis and tasks. I planned to further develop in this direction. But at the HSE new interests arose and this is quite natural. Interests are important, and so are the instruments and data you use to achieve your research goals. Taking these factors into account I changed the sphere of my expertise towards labour and family economics. It is also interesting to work with the Russian data and deal with the issues that are significant for this country. Working in this sphere I began a fruitful co-authorship with my colleague from ICEF, Dr. Fabian Slonymzyk, a specialist in labour economics. I have a good knowledge of structural modeling due to my background in macroeconomics, and Fabian is an applied microeconomist, so our alliance turned out to be a great combination. This year our first joint work was published in Labour Economics, and this is my first article in this new field. It is not easy switching to a new sphere of research – you have to learn a lot and things do not go as fast as you would like them to. But it gives you new ideas and topics to explore, so there are endless opportunities for development.

There is Always Room for Improvement

Dr. Udara Peiris:

One of the big challenges for the HSE in general is to create a democratic academic environment and atmosphere. There should be open discussion, transparency, and accountability. In ICEF this is starting to develop, so I think this is a sign of a great department and something that should be developed on a larger scale. You should be able to critique people and there should be an understanding that this is just part of the profession that helps us get better. It seems to me that professional culture in Russia is focused on minimising conflicts, where you want to have consensus and do things in a less transparent way. The HSE in general is a very hierarchical system. I believe that major decisions at the university must be made through voting, committees and discussions. Of course, it makes the whole process slower but it makes everybody interested, and the faculty feels that they are part of the university. It's only through this that science becomes the most important thing.

Dr. Olga Baysha:

To be honest, I expected the HSE – one of Russia's leading research universities – to be more "westernised" in terms of academic culture. I have been surprised to discover that there are no routine faculty meetings here and that faculty members do not actively participate in decision-making. I guess, this can be explained by the legacy of authoritarian tradition in Russian in a broader cultural sense. This could lead to isolation and alienation on the part of internationally-hired specialists, I think.

Dr. Vladimir Panov:

One thing, which I sometimes cannot understand at all, is the bureaucracy inside the university. For instance, I was quite surprised when I once heard that the managers of the department travel almost every day from the campus on Shabolovka to the main building just to get some papers signed. In Europe, secretaries send all documents through internal post, a normally secure and fast way of communication between campuses.

Dr. Emiliano Catonini:

In terms of the development of our university I think the HSE struggled a little bit on the job market to hire new economists this year. Candidates came to Moscow in February, just when we found ourselves in an era of Cold War between Russia and the west again. So, I think this caused difficulty in attracting people. Moreover we suffered from competition of other universities more than expected. So, I think we wanted to hire more people. But I trust that next year the scenario will be much more favourable.

What I Would or Wouldn't Do, if I Were ... Me

Dr. Udara Peiris:

I wouldn't have brought so much stuff. I didn't realise how much of a hustle customs is. Then I would make an effort to meet people. There is an active expatriate community and there are lots of Russians that are part of this community. Once you have a network of people, adjusting here is fine. And I would explore the city, in summer it's beautiful.

Dr. Dina Balalaeva:

I would be more proactive, for example, in building interdisciplinary connections. I would recommend that my colleagues, especially internationally hired faculty, should contact people from the HSE who share their research interests and discuss possible joint projects. Speaking about culture shock, I would suggest that new faculty should not be afraid to talk to their Russian colleagues about whatever issues they have instead of wondering silently or asking Google. Russians are open, they don't mind explaining cultural differences and giving advice on how to survive in Russia.

Dr. Emiliano Catonini:

I would see things as opportunities and have a positive attitude to challenges. Of course, it is much easier to move to Copenhagen, but it wouldn't be as exciting.

Dr. Olga Baysha:

I would have acted differently in terms of mundane issues. For example, I wouldn't have brought high-heeled shoes here from the US. The distances in Moscow are huge and I need to walk a lot. Also, I would have been more cautious in terms of renting an apartment – it is so dark in winter in Moscow, and I need more light.

Dr. Eren Arbatli:

I would have learned Russian as much as I could have before coming to Moscow and then I would have devoted more time to learning Russian after my arrival. Every hour you spend is worth it. You cannot imagine how many minor and major inconveniences I could have avoided if I could have engaged in simple conversations with Russians right away. A few recommendations to non-Russian speaking new arrivals: get to know the city while the weather is still good. Try to maintain a positive attitude as you learn more about Moscow and Russian culture. Try to find ways to keep your curiosity alive and enjoy the process instead of complaining about everything that is unfamiliar or does not work as expected.