University Traditions: Russia

Isak Froumin and Dmitry Semyonov
Institute of Education, National Research University Higher School of Economics, Moscow, Russia

Definition

Russian university tradition is a combination of ideas, university models, and practices, that were implemented during the historical development of higher education in Russia.

Introduction

The Russian university tradition is complex. It combines several patterns of higher education development and ideas about what constitutes a university. As the term “tradition” usually refers to the perceptions of the past, the national university tradition therefore represents a sophisticated product of reflections and opinions (Vishlenkova 2014; Vishlenkova and Dmitriev 2013).

It would not be appropriate to consider the Russian university tradition as the outcome of a continuous evolutionary development. It is rather the cumulative result of several periods, which represented alternatives to each other. However, at least one peculiarity remained constant throughout the history of the Russian university: its coherence with the state (e.g., Clark 1983, pp. 98–99), and whatever goals the latter might have had at any given time. The issues of university autonomy and these institutions’ role vis-a-vis the government and society were central to most transformations of the higher education system (Avrus 2001; Vishlenkova and Dmitriev 2013). This main feature has prevailed despite the fact that the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union had each integrated several countries with their own traditions of higher learning (the Baltics and Central Asia).

Russia missed the “mediaeval” stage in its university development. The delay in establishing the first universities (in comparison with Europe) might be explained by such foundations not having been a necessity for the state. Yet, with the gradual expansion of the university idea, it arrived in Russia at the same time as many other “foreign” ideas appeared in the country (Andreev 2009, p. 89).

This entry covers three periods between the key historical milestones that have shaped the development of higher education in Russia.

The first part considers ideas of the university from its creation to the last days of the Russian Empire. The European concept of a university was imported over 300 years ago but it would first take on recognizable form in the second half of the eighteenth century (Andreev 2005, p. 110). In the nineteenth century, Humboldtian principles converged with the Napoleonic emphasis on educating a bureaucracy (Charle 2004, p. 52), and
with strong reference to the sociopolitical requirements of the Russian Empire. The next part presents how the Revolution turned the university idea in a new direction. The Bolsheviks reconceptualized the role of higher education with regard to the goals of social engineering and nation-building (Froumin et al. 2014). By second half of the 1930s, the system had expanded and gained most of the features of the Soviet model: full central government control, narrow specialization of entities, embeddedness in national industrial structure, vocationalism, and detachment of research from most of higher education institutions. The third part refers to university development after the collapse of the USSR. Massification and marketization as well as the radical reforms changed the institutional landscape and the made the character of the Russian university tradition more dispersed. Final summary provides some concluding remarks and reflections.

Adoption of the University Idea

Despite several previous attempts to establish higher learning institutions (e.g., the Slavo-Greco-Latin Academy), the start of the university tradition refers to the foundation of the Academic University in Saint Petersburg. It was opened in 1724 by decree of Peter the Great, the Russian Emperor, who was keen on reforms based on European ideas. The Academic University and the Gymnasium were parts of a new larger establishment – the Academy of Science, which engaged several famous scholars from Europe (e.g., Daniel Bernoulli and Leonhard Euler). Thus, it would be accurate to consider it a proto-university, as the institution first of all represented the educational function that had been assigned to the Academy (Andreev 1998). It was more the graduate school that helped to disseminate the ideas of modern science in Russia and train the first Russian-born scholars, though. The university existed formally until 1766, but did not become a model for higher learning in Russia due to the lack of demand and its insufficient scale.

In 1754, the Russian scientist Mikhail Lomonosov (a graduate of the Academic University and former visiting student at Marburg University), together with the influential member of the imperial court Ivan Shuvalov, convinced the Empress Elizabeth to establish a university in Moscow based on a foreign model. Moscow University, established in 1755, became the landmark of the Russian higher learning idea and managed to sustain its primary role throughout the entire national university history. The university’s first Statute reflected various traditions of existing European universities (Andreev 2005, pp. 110–12). For the first five decades, the university had to overcome such obstacles as the lack of faculty and low demand in society, which considered it the “Tsarina’s toy.” It later managed to expand gradually and gain in prestige and power.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the government opened new universities in Derpt (now Tartu, Estonia), Kharkov (now in the Ukraine), Kazan, and Saint Petersburg. However, at the beginning of the 1820s, these universities were still rather small, with the average number of students reaching 100, except for at Moscow University (700 students) (Avrus 2001, p. 17). The university statute (1804) provided them with significant autonomy (for instance, the election of professors) (Avrus 2001, pp. 13–15). At the same time, the statute brought the universities into the government hierarchy, making them the centers of the education districts in their respective countries and their rectors – heads of districts (Andreev 2009, p. 292).

The model of the Prussian university (see The German University Tradition), already so remarkable at the beginning of the nineteenth century, provided the benchmark for the Russian government in its development of a university system. The basic defining element of this model, the unification of teaching and research, took root in Russia. Nevertheless, as in certain other places around Europe, the model was localized with regard to national particularity and the monarch’s vision on the purposes of higher learning. Therefore, the Napoleonic model, with its centralized bureaucratic structures, direct orientation toward the future workplace (as in the case of the Grands
Écoles), and control over curriculum, also found its representation in the practice of building a national university tradition (Andreev 2005). From that time, the basic feature of the emerging university system was its incorporation in the state’s bureaucracy. For instance, the opportunity to embark on the career path of a public servant, avoiding the traditional military route, attracted people to university. The primary orientation of graduates to public service, an element of the French model, maintained a certain contradiction in the Russian universities all the way through the tsarist period (Charle 2004, p. 52; Andreev 2009, pp. 292–93).

Hence, the government often considered universities as centers of opposition, and occasionally tried to oppress the liberty of their professors and administration. With seven universities spread out around the country, Nicholas I began his reign with an offensive launched against the universities on behalf of the conservatives. Increasing government control led to the change of regulations developed by the minister of education Sergei Uvarov. He was the author of famous the policies maxim: Orthodoxy, Autocracy, and Nationalism. The main reforms of 1830–1840 brought unification of university life as well as in the broader life of the country. That was the time, when the state started to regard universities as a system (Vishlenkova and Dmitriev 2013). Elimination of international recruitment of professors came along with an increase in long-term academic internships abroad for Russian professors. Faculty members also obtained the status of high-level public officials. By the second half of the century, the university system had increased enrolment and strengthened its role in the national elite and the state in general. Yet, revolutions in Europe and new revelations of potential dangers ended up bringing a new wave of assaults on universities, decreasing their autonomy and forcing changes to the curriculum (including military studies and Orthodox theology, instead of the humanities and social studies).

Alexander II brought more liberalization for universities as for other spheres of life (e.g., the abolition of serfdom in 1861). During his reign, the university system expanded, and several new universities were established. The awarding of degrees and doctoral training that started later compensated for the lack of professors. Professors became wealthier; hence the universities attracted new personnel. The growth and consolidation of the faculty body enhanced the university’s research activities.

In prerevolutionary Russia, students and professors took a more active part in various social movements and protests (Kassow 1989). At one point, political parties could even operate legally within the universities. On the one hand, the government intended to avoid the transformation of universities into centers of protest. On the other hand, the need for a mature higher education system pushed the authorities to loosen control and regulation of university life (Andreev 2009; Avrus 2001).

By the end of the nineteenth century, the Russian higher education system already included various other kinds of institution apart from universities. Almost half of students before the First World War studied in professional programs that would still be relevant to refer to as higher learning (Russian Academy of Science 1995). These institutions included “higher schools” and colleges of law, oriental studies, medicine, teacher training, agriculture, theology, engineering (making up two thirds of the nonuniversity sector), agriculture, veterinarian science, arts, and military and naval academies. This is significant for an understanding of the Russian higher education tradition that gets beyond the pure notion of the university. The expansion of the higher education sector at the end of the nineteenth century and beyond was due not only to increase in the number of universities but also that of “professional” institutes and polytechnics (Alston 1983).

As we see from the subsequent development of higher education in the Soviet era and later, the search for a balance between a pragmatic utilitarian view and the traditional (“classic”) image of a higher learning institution was almost always in the policy agenda.
Higher Education Redefined: A Classless Society and Institutions of Higher Learning

The Soviet economy and social model required a very specific higher education system. The basic function of this system was to produce manpower for the planned and state-owned economy. Some scholars claim that Soviet pragmatism detached the national university model from European ideas on education (Kuraev 2016). However, one can also see the reinvention of German vocationalism or the French (Napoleonic) notion of higher education institutions serving the utilitarian objectives of the state. Moreover, Soviet institutions functioned as a major element in the state’s social engineering system as a whole.

After the October Revolution, the ruling elites had different views on the future of universities (Froumin and Kouzminov 2017). Some even advocated the shutting down of existing entities as producers of capitalist culture and ideology. However, communist idealism had another side: higher education as an equalizer, as a social engineering mechanism, and as a channel for ideological influence. Hence, higher education institutions had to be opened for underprivileged groups, the student community had to be vastly changed, and curricula had to fall in line with the new goals of the communist state.

The authorities did not favor the traditional university model (Dmitriev 2013). During the early Soviet period, the government established many specialized institutes, often by means of dividing large multidisciplinary universities into smaller parts. Along with this process, these institutes were transferred under the jurisdiction of various sectoral ministries (David-Fox 2012). Those changes resulted in a system with a large number of highly specialized and relatively small institutions. This design was almost completed by the end of the 1930s and would not see essential change until the 1990s (Froumin et al. 2014).

Importantly, the government did not assign these specialized institutions a university status, and the classical comprehensive universities continued to exist as another model aimed at the production of political and academic elites. However, for the description of the Russian university tradition, it is significant to keep all these different kinds of higher learning institution in focus. The pragmatic vocationalism of the Soviet university model partly coincides with the European traditions of focused professional training. This model implied that people follow job pathways, meaning more determinism in the vision of professional trajectories (including on a territorial basis). The Soviet approach considered this as the way to professional excellence, while an alternative viewpoint would point out the limitations for mobility and career building.

Another feature of the Soviet model was the organizational separation of research and educational activities. Universities had limited access to the national research infrastructure, mostly concentrated in the Academy of Sciences and specialized institutes under the sectoral authorities. Hence, it was not natural for the majority of universities to combine research and education in a consistent manner (Johnson 2008, p. 160). Yet, this separation let the science sector develop in its own autonomous way. In fact, some major research centers were implicitly tied to the strong universities. Besides, the top-tier research centers existed within “oases” of science. For instance, Moscow Institute of Physics and Technology (est.1946) was well known for its “PhysTech system”: highly selective admission (including the networks for identification of the gifted youth), engagement of leading scientists in education process, environment of research and creative engineering. Another example, Novosibirsk University (est. 1959) emerged as an example of synergy between the Academy of Science and a high-quality comprehensive university. These “islands of science” represented Soviet-type research universities; thus this model was brought to life at several spots in the country.

The ideals of the period determined several of the achievements of the Soviet university, which became a natural part of the Russian tradition. Firstly, the total absence of a market laid the ground for public higher education. It was considered the social responsibility of the state to provide a reasonable degree of access to higher education to all (although with admission on a
Secondly, the socioeconomic structure of the population as well as special measures for the engagement of traditionally unprivileged groups enabled one of the most impressive projects against inequality in human history. Moreover, the role of higher education in national industrial development and the economic priorities of the state determined great investments in higher education institutions as well as science in particular sectors. This resulted in one of the most massified systems in the world, which would become even larger on the dissolution of the USSR.

Post-Soviet Higher Education

The description of the Russian university tradition would not be complete without the picture of a post-Soviet university, reflecting the variety of rapid changes and reforms. The essence of the Soviet university put up considerable resistance to other idealistic models (e.g., Avis 1990), though it also demonstrated adaptability to the new conditions, albeit with great difficulties (Titova 2008; Klyachko et al. 2002; Abankina and Tatyana 2013). The major trends that affected the Russian higher education system were the extreme changes in the economic environment (e.g., in the labor market, and structural shifts in the economy) (Balzer 1994; Gimpelson and Kapelyushnikov 2011, pp. 43–54); massification; marketization; and targeted policies from the second half of the 2000s aimed at system segmentation (Platonova and Semyonov 2017). Consequences included massive horizontal diversification of higher education institutions (including the creation of a large private education sector); vertical differentiation within the system; and such “new rules” of the game as a national entrance examination, partial segmentation of degrees (bachelor’s, master’s, and doctoral), and accountability of HEIs to the authorities.

New economic conditions and political liberalization made households invest in higher education from the mid-90s to the mid-2000s in a tremendously rapid manner. The growth of participation (similar to general worldwide trends) determined one of the greatest massification processes in either Russian higher education history or globally. Many new private institutions emerged each year. Marketization fit the current temporary interests of most of the stakeholders. Existing public institutions with a long history, primarily Soviet-born, opened a wide range of new programs in the social sciences, management, and humanities. Part-time education expansion also contributed to the shift from mass to universal higher education (Trow 1973). Massification was not supported by the appropriate human resources and curricular depth, however. Quality of education became the most important issue in policy discussion and a general social concern. However the state-university connection remained the main feature for the public sector in higher education. The private sector was gradually marginalized and came to serve as a demand-absorption part of the system.

The government has considered higher education development as a priority since the second half of the 2000s. It created various support programs to inspire change in HEIs. Several institutions that had managed to save their research and education potential succeeded in these programs. Step by step, by increasing their assets, they became national leaders. The search for the proper forms of leading institutions led the government to launch several mergers, establishing the super-HEIs (federal universities). Then, in the 2010s, mergers primarily took place in cases of low performance recognized by the government. The organizational changes that the state implemented in the 2010s indicated a shift from institutional to organizational instruments. After a shadow period of survival, HEIs now had to be more accountable, primarily to the state rather than to the public. Investments in research intensification and internationalization pushed HEIs to be more productive in that sense. In 2013, the Government launched Russian excellence initiative aimed at promotion of top-tier Russian universities in the global rankings (“5-100” Program: at least five universities in top hundreds of the major world rankings). The program implies for crucial change. Among other countries, Russia tries to fit the model of “world-class university” to the
national top universities: some of the participating universities were born with the notion of university in tsarist Russia and some resulted from Soviet period and even from the post-Soviet times.

**Constants and Variables of the Russian Tradition**

The blurred boundaries of the title of “university” in the post-Soviet period force us to consider most higher education institutions as universities by default. Massification, which involves the Russian higher education system among many others, has melted away most of the borders between types of HEIs. The fluctuations in the external context (e.g., economy and politics) have confused the notions of prestige, compliance with ideals of the good-old-days, and the unity of the university mission. Thus, we see in the same picture old universities born in the Empire alongside post-Soviet market-oriented institutions, where both act in a very similar way and sometimes address the same university ideas. This raises the issue of the stable and changing features of the Russian university tradition.

As mentioned above, commitment to the goals of the state remained in place throughout all three periods of the country’s higher education history. This led to several dichotomies of education policy during those times, and also shaped the wider discourse on the mission of higher education in Russia.

Firstly, there is the trade-off between a university’s academic autonomy and its utility for society. In different periods, the government took the responsibility to decide to what extent universities would most properly serve the priorities of development that were then of most import to the nation.

Secondly, the choice between vocationalism (including public service) and a “basicness” of education provided the field of policies. In Soviet times, for instance, most of the system ended up pushed into the track of professionalization, while still having islands of almost unlimited intellectualism.

Thirdly, the DNA of the Russian university has always demanded a solution to the problem of unity between research and education. Under the monarchy, the government decided this with regard to the current line-up of priorities, while the Soviet model pragmatically allocated these functions to different parts of the system.

Finally, the place of humanities and social sciences is crucial. The government either opted to utilize this part of the curriculum or left it to the “sciences.” For most of the historical trajectory that has defined the national tradition, the state rarely missed the chance to employ universities to produce the right people, appropriate for their social function in whatever way the state saw it at the time.

For broader reflection, it is significant to state the gains of higher education development in Russia. Russian universities cover most of the population now, access to higher education is wide, and the system is quite massified. The Russian university has overcome periods of elite reproduction and, following a long and winding road, has arrived at the point where higher education is a social norm and universities are generally appreciated as a respectable social institution. The diversity of higher education forms and ambiguities of ideals to address nevertheless make higher education a field of disputes and battles to be fought and won.

**References**


