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International Comparative Education: A Case for Russia

Background: The Current System

Moscow State University (MSU) in Russia does not have an adequate general education curriculum as part of the undergraduate requirements. In Russia, students choose their specializations in high school. Additionally, the curriculum does not cover classical topics such as the exploration of human nature. Only a small part of Russian literature classes devotes themselves to discovering themes of virtue, knowledge, or friendship. If students do not select a specialization in philology in high school, they only cover those important themes superficially.

At the collegiate level, Russian students are not able to change their specialization even as freshmen. Unlike schools in the United States, which have elementary, middle school, and high school, Russia's general education curriculum is completed by the end of middle school. Therefore, neither high school nor college students focus on discussing deeper topics related to human nature. However, the exploration of human nature is a fundamental step towards the realization of the main purpose of life, which will lead to a more virtuous and balanced way of life.

At the same time, high schools and colleges in Russia require a very individualistic approach during exams. Teachers seldom give group projects or assignments. This is very problematic as it is not representative of the "real world". Practicing working in groups strengthens their ability to work in teams in order to succeed in future careers. The whole curriculum is focused on getting as much informational material as possible during college.

Besides an early specialization in Russia, the educational system is technically divided between the Western Bologna/American and the traditional Soviet Union/Russian approach. If you are admitted into a Western Bologna or American educational system, Russian professors try to deliver all the material in four years instead of five or even six years like the Soviet Union approach. Thus, there is less space for the implementation of the potential requirements for the general education curriculum. Undergraduate students are already under great pressure without any possibility to have creativity or flexibility during their studies. Such a rigid educational system with only core courses does not provide any opportunity to consider the unique differences of each student's personality.

MSU's 1998 charter declares "democracy, openness, and self-government to be the main principles in the life of Moscow University; the main goal is freedom to teach and to study as well as to develop oneself as a personality." This reflects the long-standing tradition of Moscow State as the most prominent higher education institution in Russia. Additionally, the President of Russia in 1998 was Boris Yeltsin, who is noted as one of the most liberal Presidents in the history of the Russian Federation. Therefore, the liberal views of Yeltsin can help explain the democratic charter of MSU.

Since the 2000s, the President of Russia has been Vladimir Putin, notoriously known as one of the most authoritarian leaders of Russia. As a result, the political situation has changed dramatically which affects the whole educational system, especially at MSU. The charter has not been updated for more than 20 years and, consequently, it does not reflect the current status of Moscow State University. There are only three higher education institutions in Russia, which are technically not under control of the Russian Department of Education. These are Saint Petersburg State University, Moscow Institute of International Relations, and Moscow State University. Vladimir Putin has full power over the three most prestigious higher education

institutions in Russia. As a result, the monopolistic power of Putin creates even more obstacles to transforming the system democratically, where the lack of philosophical discussions is a direct outcome of Putin's authoritarianism.

Philosophy of Education

The next discussion on the Russian education system is going to be grounded on the various philosophical understandings of education and its role in our society.

To begin with, the absence of a general education curriculum combined with the inflexibility to choose electives creates a very fixed and unbalanced approach to the education of undergraduate students at MSU. According to Aristotle, "virtue is a sort of medial condition because it is able to aim at and hit the mean."¹ We cannot say that the Russian curriculum works according to the concept of Aristotelian virtue because there is an excess in information provided due to an early specialization, and deficiency in training and experience to acquire practical wisdom. Aristotle stated, "it is neither possible to be fully good without practical wisdom nor practically-wise without virtue of character."² In order to educate and raise good students at MSU, it is necessary to build a general education curriculum that will provide more time for acquiring practical wisdom as a virtue of thought. Similarly, a practically wise student will be able to thrive only with the virtues of character, such as generosity or temperance. Such significant virtues of character will be possible to develop only if there is a clearly defined general education curriculum created and implemented by MSU.

Besides keeping the opportunity to change specialization for freshmen, MSU should include more open discussion seminars in order to develop crucial virtues of character. Only then students will be able to make the right decisions in their lives. According to Aristotle, by graduation MSU would not have provided students with enough experience to obtain practical wisdom. On the other hand, MSU provides students with a great amount of theoretical wisdom. As Aristotle said, "each is the virtue of a different part of the soul."³ Therefore, it is a matter of paramount importance to be well balanced during students' development, as exploring virtue ensures a healthy soul that leads to be a content and fulfilled person.

According to Jacques Maritain, it is important to develop your personality together with your soul. Every soul is so unique that it is hard to live a meaningful life if you consider people according to the concept of so-called linear regression. In comparison with another statistical concept, such as nonlinear regression, then it becomes more evident that every soul consists of many different dots that are placed randomly on a surface or a graph. Moreover, these dots are not necessarily following the designated order or placed along the linear function on the graph. In other words, even a general education curriculum should follow some flexibility in terms of its requirements, where students can still select electives. Only with the realization of the idea of the uniqueness of each student's soul will it be possible to facilitate educational diversity and inclusion.

Undoubtedly, an early specialization has its pros and cons. One such con is the inability for a student to change their major during the first years of college. This can ruin the lives of many talented students. Therefore, MSU should implement a general education curriculum, which would keep the ability to specialize already during the freshman year, but with some sort

¹ Reeve, C. D. C., *Nicomachean Ethics*, p. 27, 2014.

² *Ibid.*, p. 112.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 109.

of flexibility in terms of selecting a major during the following years. As Maritain said, “using Bergsonian language, I would say that in the education of the mind that emphasis should be shifted from that which is pressure (which, of course, remains somewhat necessary, but secondary) to that which awakens and frees the aspirations of spiritual nature in us”.⁴ The ability to change majors during the first two years of college will significantly reduce the pressure on undergraduate students and help them follow their free spirit.

Education should be a collaborative effort between teachers and students. This is not so at MSU. According to Paulo Freire, there is a “banking method” of education at MSU. Most of the professors see themselves as the sole possessors of knowledge while they see their students as empty receptacles into which professors deposit their knowledge. The absence of open dialogue in seminars proves that there is a lack of conversation, especially at public universities. The youth desires more freedom because with freedom comes humanization. “Authentic liberation — the process of humanization — is not another deposit to be made in men. Liberation is a praxis: the action and reflection of men and women upon their world in order to transform it.”⁵ Without praxis, the process of dehumanization prevails, and people are treated as objects rather than subjects. Transformation is necessary through the engagement in praxis. According to the ideology of Paulo Freire, MSU alienates students from being themselves because they become informational fanatics incapable of critique, which makes them incapable of any creative work.

Even though MSU students try to ignite transformation by becoming more aware of reality, it is hard to start thinking critically with the prevailing “banking method” of education. The absence of critical thinking at a college level at MSU creates a lack of authenticity in students because they are not allowed to be authentic. As a result, there is also no freedom because to be free you also need to be authentic. According to Freire, transformation means that the destruction of old principles is necessary in order to build something new. Therefore, it is crucial to deconstruct the Western Bologna and the Soviet educational systems to build a true Western American system. Unification of the whole undergraduate educational system together with the implementation of the general education curriculum would make it easier for students to build experiences and exchange knowledge with more international students to be at the forefront of scientific discoveries throughout the world.

Based on Freire’s conception of education, he would oppose any kind of lecture-based classes even at the undergraduate level. However, Jacques Maritain would say that lectures need to be given in a way that puts more emphasis on a student’s understanding of the material rather than pure recitation. Jacques Maritain believed that a good professor must have knowledge that a student does not have. Furthermore, it is necessary to also understand where students are in terms of their comprehension of the material so that the professors can help students to be where they aspire to be.

On the other hand, Jean-Jacques Rousseau considered society worthless and dependence on it only made people worse off. Without the need for society, there is no place for education because through education people become too dependent on each other. According to Rousseau, freedom comes only when people obey themselves. At the same time, education creates a need for hierarchies within the society wherein people are unequal. There is some controversy in Rousseau’s understanding of the societal structure because he introduced the idea of a so-called lawgiver: “To discover the best rules of society suited to each nation would require a superior

⁴ Maritain, J., *Education at the Crossroads*, p. 42, 1960.

⁵ Freire, P., *Pedagogy of the oppressed*, p. 79, 2000.

intelligence who saw all of men's passions and experienced none of them, who had no relation to our nature and who knew it profoundly..."⁶ There is irony in his words because the lawgiver could not actually be God even though the idea Rousseau describes could only be related to God.

On the other hand, Edmund Burke considered hierarchy within the society as a positive factor because that contributes to the overall respect towards traditions and culture. The professor-student relationship is supported by Burke through the principles of hierarchy. Edmund Burke believed, "When ancient opinions and rules of life are taken away, the loss cannot possibly be estimated. From that moment we have no compass to govern us; nor can we know distinctly to what port we steer."⁷ Consequently, it is also important to keep the ability for students to specialize as part of the Russian tradition, but with the potential implementation of a general education curriculum during the first two years at MSU.

Group projects also contribute to the understanding of the fundamental conception of friendship. That concept is extremely important for undergraduate students because friendship plays an important role in the understanding of human nature. According to Aristotle, "friendship is a sort of virtue or involves virtue" which is to say that friends bring more happiness into people's lives.⁸

God in *Paradise Lost* by John Milton showed a great example of a true exalted form of friendship with his Son, the Messiah. If MSU students studied *Paradise Lost*, God and his Son created their own community in order to achieve the betterment of the whole universe and all human beings. Adam and Eve ate the fruit from the Forbidden Tree, then the Son of God volunteered to be the Messiah and to help save humankind. This demonstrated true virtues in the world. As a result, the relationship between God and the Messiah became stronger and more meaningful for both. The Son says,

"...Behold Me then, Me for him, life for life
I offer. On Me let thine anger fall.
Account Me Man. I for his sake will leave..."⁹

These words make it evident how much love and respect the Messiah had not only for his Heavenly Father but also for the whole humankind. Such sacrifices contribute to mutual personal growth and overall social welfare.

Friendships also have a positive impact on mental health. Good friends relieve stress, provide comfort and joy, as well as prevent isolation and loneliness. A cohort model at MSU provides the opportunity to develop true virtuous friendships that can be possible only between good people who share similar virtues. The implementation of the open discussion seminars paired with a general education curriculum would enhance students' abilities to learn not only from the professors but also from each other. This would enable them to explore how to be truly virtuous in the world on a deeper level. At the same time, building friendships helps with confidence, provides a sense of belonging and helps in reducing health issues such as anxiety and

⁶ Rousseau, J., & Scott, J. T., *The major political writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau: The two Discourses and the Social contract*, p. 190, 2012.

⁷ *Select Works of Edmund Burke*. A New Imprint of the Payne Edition. Foreword and Biographical Note by Francis Canavan, p. 172, Vol. 2.

⁸ Reeve, C. D. C., *Nicomachean Ethics*, p. 136, 2014.

⁹ Milton, J., *Paradise Lost*, 3.235-237, 2005.

depression. For instance, Crawford states, “Depression presents itself as an illness of responsibility in which the dominant feeling is that of failure. The depressed individual is unable to measure up: he is tired of having to become himself.”¹⁰ As a result, the implementation of group projects would help students to be themselves by showing each student’s talent in their contribution to the team. Therefore, they reduce the likelihood of depression, loneliness, and anxiety.

Curriculum Implementation

The implementation of electives within a general education curriculum will help undergraduate students to balance their energy if they feel overwhelmed. “Deliberately falling out of love is not a jump of the will, it is the acquiring of new objects of attention and thus of new energies as a result of refocusing”.¹¹ As a result, it is evident that the Russian curriculum negatively affects the psychological state of many students. The lack of electives makes it extremely difficult to refocus on topics other than just core courses in students’ majors. That is also why many students are easily burned out at MSU. Their energy and attention decrease without any ability to find new sources of inspiration.

It is also important to consider mentorships, which are spreading throughout universities in the U.S. MSU has never implemented any kind of mentorship model. However, here in the United States, the idea of mentorship is becoming more widespread. Most of the mentors are the graduates of the same university who then become mentors for younger generations of students. Kierkegaard described this: “To go to school no longer means to be in fear of the master, or merely to learn, but rather implies being interested in the problem of education”.¹² To be educated means more than just graduating from a university; it means staying connected with the alma mater throughout life and contributing to the development of the educational process through mentoring younger generations of undergraduate students. MSU should implement such mentorship programs as part of its general education curriculum. It would also help with the idea of deepening the cross-generational connections as well as providing enough time for undergraduate students to obtain some practical wisdom even earlier than it would have happened through just their own experiences.

Sexual education is another important idea that needs to be implemented in a general education curriculum or at least an elective at MSU. Throughout the history of the Soviet Union, it was prohibited to talk about sex. There was a common saying: “There is no sex in the USSR!” which meant it was taboo in the USSR to openly discuss sex. There was no sex education in the Soviet Union from the mid-1930s and onwards. Only in the 1980s did Soviet media start to publish information about sex, contraception, and related topics. However, even in modern Russia, there is not enough of adequate sex education. Teenagers have to learn everything from the Internet on their own; teachers and most parents are still embarrassed to properly educate their children about such crucial topics as a safe sexual life. Since the Russian government implemented a national ban on comprehensive sex education materials for teenagers younger than 18, it should be a matter of paramount importance to implement comprehensive sex education in a general education curriculum at least at a college level even though it might be too late.

¹⁰ Crawford, M. B., *The world beyond your head*, p. 161, 2015.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 173.

¹² Crawford, M. B., *The world beyond your head*, p. 190, 2015.

According to *Global Information and Education on HIV and AIDS*, Russia has the largest HIV epidemic in Central Asia and Eastern Europe. Unlike most countries, Russia's HIV epidemic is growing. The rate of new infections is rising by approximately 15% every year. It is estimated that over 200 people become infected every day. As a result, the absence of sex education at MSU jeopardizes health of youth nationwide. Furthermore, it is very difficult to obtain reliable statistical data about Russia and the student population at MSU. Only reliable statistical data can potentially contribute to positive reforms within the country and the university system itself. Crawford stated, "Kinsey's data on the prevalence of homosexuality became a tool in the movement for gay rights, and a sort of epistemic foundation for gay identity politics".¹³ It is evident that statistical data, revealed by the respectable professor Alfred Kinsey, gave the first impulse for the liberation of American society and its true democratic culture. Even small steps such as the existence of reliable statistical data about the population of students at MSU can eventually contribute to the implementation of the human rights' protections as well as sexual education classes in the general education curriculum.

Moscow State University does not provide any opportunity to liberate students from authority as the way to discover their individualism. Flexibility with electives within a general education curriculum is a necessity in order to enable every student to develop their own individuality. At the same time, according to Crawford, the development of your individuality is not possible without simultaneously observing processes of cooperation and conflict among individuals. Consequently, implementing open discussion seminars that were mentioned earlier is crucial because only during open discussions students will enable each other to share their views that might be different from other classmates. As a result, students would learn how to have a constructive dialogue even though some classmates would not always agree on some issues. Moreover, students would be able to deepen their knowledge and understanding of human nature. Only then students would be able to be truly virtuous and to make better choices in their life after graduation.

It is crucial to take into consideration that students' abilities are different; therefore, the implementation of electives within a general education curriculum is extremely important. "A due regard for the diversity of human excellence would include a due deference to the diversity of learning styles."¹⁴ Students would be able to have some flexibility and tailor their curriculum according to their own abilities and needs.

Education at Moscow State University is very specialized and focused primarily on theory rather than practice. There are only core theoretical courses. Students have to work full-time in order to get some practical experience during their full-time studies. Education becomes a secondary focus for students in this case because they realize that without some "real-world" work experience, they will not be able to get any employment after graduation.

"To reclaim the real in education would be to understand that one is educating a person who is situated in the world and orients to it through a set of human concerns. This is more effective than addressing oneself to a generic *rational being* and expecting him or her to get excited."¹⁵

¹³ Crawford, M. B., *The world beyond your head*, p. 200, 2015.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 256.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 257.

To get students' full attention and make education their primary goal again, it is essential to combine theory with practice at Moscow State University, so students can get credits for doing internships, co-ops, and part-time work.

Recommendations

As part of the final recommendations, it is crucial to reduce the number of classes to four to six classes each semester. Eight to ten classes a semester puts a lot of pressure and stress on students at Moscow State University. Moreover, the administration of Moscow State University should eliminate three different educational systems at the undergraduate level in order to provide the same opportunities for students to be able to conduct more scientific exchange internationally. The unified Western American educational system for undergraduate students would make it easier to implement a general education curriculum during their first two years. That way students would be able to assess their ability better before they make their final commitment to major in another field of studies.

At the same time, the specializations are so narrow at Moscow State University that students who choose to study law, history, or languages do not have to take any contemporary science classes. This creates a big gap in their knowledge. The absence of a credit-based system at MSU makes it impossible to transfer to any other university, even if they offer a similar specialization. Students, in most cases, are required to take a significant number of prerequisites in order to transfer or get accepted at any international university, especially in the United States. Almost every foreign university requires the evaluation of the Russian degree. The evaluation process is not only time-consuming but also requires significant financial resources in order to complete the tedious process. Even if MSU students had enough time and financial resources in order to complete the evaluation process for the potential transfer to a foreign university, many universities cannot fully verify the necessary classes due to a difference in grading system. The absence of a GPA makes the evaluation process even more complicated. Therefore, the implementation of a GPA with the general education curriculum is a matter of paramount importance for the future development of the education at MSU and Russia overall.

As part of the general education curriculum for all specializations at Moscow State University, the requirements for the following courses are needed: basic mathematics, a foreign language, comprehensive contemporary science, and introduction to Information Technology, specifically skills related to the use of Microsoft Office and statistics. Besides the classes mentioned above, additional core courses within the general education curriculum at the undergraduate level at Moscow State University should include liberal arts classes, such as the foundations of human rights, history of the world and various religions, sex education and psychology, and open discussion seminars whereby students will be able to discuss such important topics as ethics, human nature, and virtues. The history of the world and various religions is so crucial to include because every student should respect the differences between nations and their beliefs, especially considering that education is becoming more international in our modern world. These types of classes would also facilitate the understanding of such important topics as the exploration of human nature.

With the globalization of education, the world is becoming highly digitized. Therefore, human interaction has been significantly diminishing recently. The digital world absorbs the attention of people, especially undergraduate students. This occurs because of the higher vulnerability of youth. There are cases when college students find it more convenient and less

stressful to just chat virtually. Therefore, they are excluding real human interaction from their everyday life. As a result, human beings encounter the process of dehumanization, while the questions of human nature are becoming more crucial.

Online classes are becoming more popular, especially with the COVID-19 pandemic. However, even during the most difficult times it is important to keep the opportunity to have in-person open discussion seminars, where students can develop their real-life communication skills and explore their true human nature. Undoubtedly, online education provides some benefits to society. However, in this case, Moscow State University would continue to develop mostly a purely scientific idea of man. “The purely scientific idea of man is, and must be, a phenomenalized idea without reference to ultimate reality.”¹⁶ This will only isolate students from the “real world.” On the other hand, Jacques Maritain emphasized a philosophical-religious idea of man, which is not entirely verifiable in sense-experience. A philosophical idea of man is even more complicated to develop when there are so many distractions in our world created by the widespread access to social media. Therefore, it is important to combine different classes, such as Information Technology and open-discussion philosophical seminars, in order to strike the right balance between the rational use of technologies and exploration of true human nature in the world beyond our heads. The discovery of the nature of man is key because it can navigate education in the right direction. As a result, the implementation of liberal arts education within a general education curriculum at every department at MSU is critical because of the importance of the acknowledgement of a human as someone who is more than just biological, physical, and psychological phenomena. First and foremost, every human is a child of God. Creating something more meaningful and mystical than just considering human beings as purely scientific is paramount. However, today most of the departments at MSU aim at training students for the sole utility of the state; therefore, treating undergraduate students as robots rather than human beings.

In the end, all the recommendations would be possible to implement only when the administration of Moscow State University acknowledges the importance of the spirit as the root of students’ personalities. The belief in the prevalence of the philosophical transcendent nature of human beings is a prerequisite towards the great transformation of the whole educational system and the subsequent implementation of a general education curriculum that treats students as unique human beings.

¹⁶ Maritain, J., *Education at the Crossroads*, p. 5, 1960.

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