

## **SOVIET LEGACY IN HIGHER EDUCATION: SOME OBSERVATIONS FROM RUSSIA**

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### **Introduction**

Hardly more than five years ago there was no Nazarbayev University in Astana, but now Eurasian Higher Education Leaders' Forum is being held there. That shows that some magnitude has changed recently. At the same time I am taking away two things today. One of them is the strange phenomenon of nostalgia and a questioning about the essence of the Soviet legacy in higher education. I have to admit that during the last two years our group in Moscow really tried to understand what this legacy is about. When it is said that the Soviet Union had a great education system, what is meant by that precisely? I think that I am not going to give all answers but for sure I can present a few observations.

### **Key features of the higher education system in the USSR**

I have to remind you that the Soviet higher education system was the result of a very deliberate project. The founder of the Soviet state Vladimir Lenin said once that the USSR should work as one single unified factory. Higher education system was the part of the "state factory" or the "economic machinery". In other words the whole higher education system in the USSR was one big corporate university for a corporation that was called the "Soviet economy". Bolsheviks experimented and tried to develop a perfect machine to serve this purpose. We did some analysis of the types of the institutions that Bolsheviks and Soviet planners developed. It was found that the idea of specialization was really the most important when the Soviet higher education system worked as a man-power production machine.

In 1930 there were 152 universities located at the current Russian Federation's territory which is not the whole Soviet Union obviously. Only a year later big experiment on the establishment of more specialized university system had been implemented after which almost 600 universities were created. There was a great example of Moscow animal technician institute that was divided into three different specialized higher education institutions: of horse-breeding, of sheep-breeding and veterinary university. These separate and highly specialized institutions worked perfectly with employers because there was a state system of planning. The plan was not just about how many sheep to breed but how many sheep-keepers or engineers in this field particular university should train.

The most important basis of this system was mandatory job placement of university graduates. Even if we have nostalgia about this system which to some extent has worked not perfectly but OK, it should be understood that it could work only according to the assumption that a university graduate could be placed at a particular job place without any questions. When we have these nostalgic modes about better linkages between employers and universities, we have to think about the abovementioned extremes.

Another interesting observation is that Soviet authorities invented corporate universities because there were a number of universities that were connected not to particular industries but to particular enterprises. That is why students have had very meaningful training programmes starting from manual workers, then middle-level technicians and then engineers. When we talk about linkages and when I first noticed this increasingly growing discourse of employability in Europe I said to myself: "Well, now the discussions about the comeback to these models of mandatory job placement will get on the top of higher education policy agenda".

What is very important when we talk about the structure of Russia or Kazakhstan higher education systems is that the number of universities did not really grow between the end of 30s and early 90s in the former Soviet states. In early 90s universities “mushroomed” and higher education landscapes had been changed significantly. Essentially the structure of the higher education system that we inherited is very much like an industrial or corporate system. In this case we cannot be absolutely sure that it would work perfectly with the changing economic environment.

Another important feature of the Soviet higher education system is that it was very restrictive in terms of the number of students applying for a university degree. Today about 80% of the cohort of the secondary school graduates go to universities. On the other side, there were only 22 percent of school graduates who entered universities in the late Soviet time. Consequently, when such a huge increase in the number of students is taking place labor market and HE relationships transform dramatically. In the sentiments about regulated linkages between employers and higher education, it should not be forgotten that Russia in the same manner as Kazakhstan is dealing with a different market economy without a mandatory job placement. We are dealing with completely different scales of university graduates which are very difficult or even impossible to be managed directly.

The last observation to be mentioned is related to the discussion about a number of economists and lawyers. Justifiably this could be interpreted as a considerable mismatch between what the labor market needs and what universities produce. But it could also be interpreted as a bad response of the higher education system to the real needs of the labor market. Nevertheless it should be said that such structure of the higher education system was established naturally as a response to changing demands of the households for general skills to manage information, provide services, etc. Unfortunately, in many post-Soviet countries, we are constrained by the former Soviet specialization type of higher education. That is probably the most important reason why liberal arts education did not gain wide distribution in Russia for example.

As a conclusion it should be stressed that we should not jump to conclusions about the mismatch between supply and demand in post-Soviet higher education systems. We need to think about the most appropriate and effective ways to establish better linkages between the universities and the employers. Higher education could be the starting point in this process taking a good look at the current structure of the labor market, comparing it with the set of specializations, or training programmes conducted. Higher education institutions should not try to produce planned numbers of engineers and others until they understand exactly what the labor market needs in terms of qualifications and competences. At the same time the representatives of the labor market should be more active and more enthusiastic about the discussions with the universities on their future employers training