

# The Modernization of Higher Education in Russia

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**Olga Kovbasyuk (OK):** It is well known that Russia was in a state of confusion during its first years of democracy in the early 1990s. After the 1991 collapse of the Soviet Union the centralized economic system broke down and the iron curtain fell. The state started to operate in a new political and economic environment. In this context, what major changes have occurred in Russia's education system during the last 20 years of democracy?

**Alla G. Kuznetsova (AGK):** The changes can be viewed from different angles, reflecting state attitudes towards education. In the 1990s, the state strove to reduce its influence over the domain of education; however the pendulum has swung in the other direction in the last decade with the state enacting modernization of the education system in 2001, aiming to improve the accessibility, quality and efficiency of education. The reforms carried out within this modernization period considerably changed Russian education. Major areas of positive change include: *institutional organization, infrastructure, personnel policy, content standards and educational technologies, quality assessment.*

**[OK]:** Let us consider each of these areas briefly. As we know, the institutional organization at the school and university levels inherited from Soviet times clearly do not fit in with the market economy, especially when the latter tends to change much more rapidly than the educational system itself. In view of the fact that the Russian educational system as a whole, and as represented by its various units (traditional educational establishments ranging from school to university), was not aligned with the basic mechanisms and values of the free market economy, (*competition, initiative, self-management, choice, responsibility, dynamism, among others*), there was a danger that the diverging paths of development could bring education in Russia into a risk zone. Overcoming the alienation between the economic and educational systems still remains critical in modern-day Russia. This is crucial both for the development of education, and for the development of human resources capable of meeting the challenges of the 21st Century.

Within the juxtaposition of the Russian economic and educational systems, which institutional changes related to education in Russia would you see as positive?

**[AGK]:** The economic recession of the 1990s led to a sharp decrease in industry demand for employees with up-to-date qualifications. This led to a growing gap between the educational system and the labor market: educational establishments continued to function without getting any signals from the market. The reconstruction of the economy after the year 2000 made use of the accumulated supply of qualified specialists, but most of the vocational schools were unable to provide labor markets with employees who were equipped with the necessary qualifications in contemporary technologies.

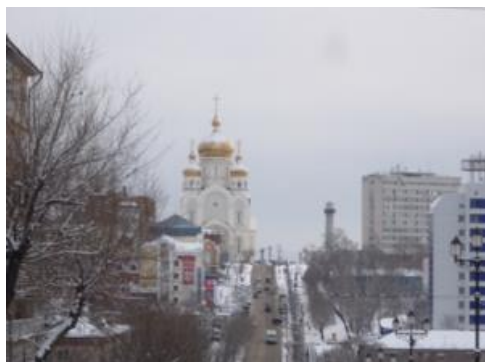


Institutional changes during the modernization period aimed to improve the alignment between the education system and the demands of the labor market. For example, the National Project “Education” was aimed at renewing incentives for professional competition in the educational milieu. The grants awarded by the state to the best teachers and educational establishments began to contribute to the formation of a healthy educational community.

However, allocating funding from the state on a ‘per student’ basis became a means of *quasi competition* among educational institutions, which led to a competition for students under the conditions of demographic decline. On the one hand, this provided a strong motivation to advance the quality of training in educational institutions. On the other hand, it caused an even bigger gap between strong and weak schools as municipal administrative bodies intervened by introducing their own powerful administrative regulations in order not to allow the under-achieving schools to go down.

Another financial tool aimed at fostering the development of education was introduced and tested during the current reforms. This was federal government funding of regional governments in exchange for specific obligations undertaken by regional institutions. For example, if a region wishes to implement an innovative educational programme in its territory, the federal government may share the cost of the programme. Programs such as “Computerization of the Education System”, “Children of the North”, and regional projects for the modernization of education have been funded through this scheme.

**[OK]:** Citizen education is a key responsibility of the educational system. In present-day Russia, this task is complicated by the historically-conditioned weakness of the civil society and its institutions. I believe that the limited participation of society and social institutions in the study and resolution of the problems of education decreases the activism and initiative of participants in the educational process. How would you describe the changes in public participation in educational management in modern Russia?



**[AGK]:** Public participation in educational management and policy-making is currently increasing, with educational institutions publishing annual reports on their work and activities on their websites. School boards of regents are being established in different types of educational institutions, and professional associations of teachers and administrators are being developed.

All strategic documents on education development utilized by the government during the modernization were open for public discussion before they were adopted. For example, the new law “Education in the Russian Federation” was revised as a result of public discussion, and is now called the “Law 3.0” by the public. Federal educational standards were also publicly discussed and were revised twice.

Public experts have been trained and have participated in preparing a number of federation-wide projects which include “The Informatization of the Education System” and “The Development of Education up to 2015”.

The civil society that is emerging in Russia is represented by different kinds of associations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and other bodies. Many NGOs, sports organizations, professional associations, cultural societies and unions involve students in social activities - a trend which is viewed as positive.

At the same time, it is important to note that the current education framework represents the interests of individuals and society in a somewhat declarative fashion rather than in practical terms (i.e. paying lip service rather than taking action). Business and local communities do not yet participate in administrative councils which retain substantial powers. The participation of civil society in the development and elaboration of educational policies and in the management of education is not yet defined and regulated sufficiently. Furthermore, the state remains responsible for key functions which range from day to day administration and control to the management of the educational system.

**[OK]:** Reflecting on the current changes in Russia’s educational infrastructure, I recall the time when people did not have any choice about what school to attend. Every student was required to attend a school in his or her area of residence, regardless of whether they liked it or not. What are your thoughts on that situation?

**[AGK]:** The situation has changed with the modernization of the educational infrastructure in Russia. Students now have access to education in accordance with their educational interests, regardless of the geographical territory they live in. The introduction of a Unified State Exam has made it possible gradually to overcome two forms of inequality: territorial inequality and inequality linked to corruption and nepotism. As a result of the system reconstruction, financial and logistical support has been provided to small schools and to new types of educational institutions such as resource centers, socio-cultural centers and schools for children of particular ages.



In the area of professional education, infrastructure changes aim to improve the relationship between preparation of students in schools and the demands of the labor market and the economy. Technological equipment in vocational schools has been modernized and availability of software, databases and Internet access are gradually improving. Availability of educational equipment has grown by about 8 percent over three years and has reached 83% for higher educational establishments and 76% for vocational schools.

More attention has also been given to inclusive education for students with physical or developmental disabilities. In 2004, as a result of an important policy decision made by the Russian Ministry of Education, centers for educating students with disabilities were set up at

prevocational, vocational and higher schools. As part of this initiative, new advanced courses for gifted students have been introduced. Distance learning has also increased, although a considerable number of distance learning programs set low entry requirements for students. Successful examples of mass distance education programs include the ones offered by the Moscow State University of Economics, Statistics and Informatics, by the Modern University for the Humanities, and by the All-Russian Distance Institute of Finance and Economics.

**[OK]:** A striking feature of our public schools is that students' performance declines as they get older. One would expect just the opposite. Success at lower educational stages should lead to even greater success at higher stages, but this does not occur. It seems that this phenomenon occurs because young people gradually lose interest in school and lose the desire to learn as they get older. Why do you think this is so?

**[AGK]:** The motivation of students depends on many factors, as we all know. Among them, educational content and educational technologies play an important role. In Russia, innovation has gradually taken place in both of these areas. New standards have been created for high schools and professional education, which aim at developing the personal and professional competencies of students. Communication and information technologies are being introduced, although the situation with educational technologies in schools is not as good as it should be, given the fast changing global educational environment.

What encourages students' initiative and motivation to study is an effective teaching strategy. Teachers in Russia have gradually moved from a pedagogic approach based on "transmitting knowledge" to a strategy which includes facilitating learning, supporting students and generating interest in learning. I have to admit, however, that recent studies have demonstrated that lecturing as a teaching strategy continues to dominate in the classroom, while active and individualized forms of learning are still not that common.

**[OK]:** The quality of the teaching profession is vital for any country to succeed in educating the younger generation. What do you think about the changes occurring within the personnel policy and teacher quality assessment system?

**[AGK]:** I agree that progress in the educational system largely depends on the quality of the teachers. Despite the existence of tens of thousands of outstanding teachers in Russia who are highly educated, dynamic and committed, there is almost no competition for entry to teacher training institutions due to the low enrollment criteria and to the perceived low status of the teaching profession. Most graduates of teacher training institutions do not consider professional work in education to be a means of social mobility and economic success. At the same time, teachers of pre-retirement and retirement age continue to dominate schools; they experience ongoing difficulties with the shift from traditional teaching and learning methods to more modern teaching and learning methods.

The progress in the education system also depends on the personnel policy, which at present is gradually changing in two directions: improving teachers' qualification levels, and providing social and economic support for teachers.

Requirements to upgrade the qualifications of teachers are on the increase. According to the new criteria, teachers need to pass a qualifying test once every five years. The government finances teacher re-training once every five years and provides a choice of programs and locations for this.

Social and economic support for teachers entails increasing salaries, targeting government support schemes (such as co-financing utility payments) at village teachers, offering bank credit for the construction and repairing of houses, government and presidential ‘top teacher’ awards, ‘teacher of the year’ awards, and others. However, teachers’ wages in Russia remain low and are far behind wages offered in businesses and in industry.

During the last decade a new teacher quality assessment system was introduced, which allows for the monitoring and comparison of educational results and achievements across different institutions and territories. This system consists of three components: student final exam results (state exams for students completing grade 9, unified state exam for high school graduates, and state qualification test of higher education graduates), ongoing monitoring of learning proficiency, and an internal quality grading system within institutions.

In general, the educational system has been changing along with the overall reforms in Russia during the last ten years. Innovations are however often introduced under strict administrative regulations. I think this is the major reason why changes in the system are not internalized and why teacher-student interactions remain hierarchical rather than dialogical. In the hierarchical classroom teachers “transmit” knowledge rather than develop competencies.



To illustrate this, we can look into the achievements of Russian high school students as reported by various international studies. For example, according to PIRLS and TIMSS ([Progress in International Reading Literacy Study](#) and [The International Math and Science Study](#)), which estimate *knowledge and skills*, Russian students score highly.

This is evidence that strongly confirms the dominance of transmissive pedagogic strategies. However, according to RISA (Regional Integrated Sciences and Assessments) which estimates *competency* level, Russia scored very low in 2000, 2003, 2006, and 2009. This reveals how far Russia underachieves where the efficiency of developing competencies is concerned, and that only a few changes, if any, have occurred in teacher-student interaction, in spite of the new educational standards, teacher re-training programs and quality assessment systems.

**[OK]:** What do you think are the main reasons for such underachievement in a number of areas? How can the situation be improved?

**[AGK]:** As I see it, the modernization of education in Russia was not fully realized due to the inertia in the old administrative regulation of education. The hierarchical system of orders and instructions still dominates and it takes a long time for a new culture and style of management to evolve. What I mean is the style characterized by strategic thinking and collegial decision making, individual responsibility and objective evaluation of the results. People are used to following orders, but not turning their ideas into action. Those who are concerned with following orders care mainly for control and reporting. Only those who translate their ideas into action are able to create new projects, explore new ways of doing things, probe, and innovate.

I believe that a new type of teacher will emerge along with the introduction of a new management system that will enable one to revise and update educational content, to improve student-teacher interaction, and to develop new ways of thinking, acting, communicating, and collaborating.

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**Interviewer: Olga Kovbasyuk**

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