

PhD Studies in Russia: The Aspirantura

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With the heartfelt gratitude and the deep respect towards the “parents” of international educational cooperation between Novgorod State University (Russia) and Dortmund University (Germany)

After working as PhD students in the framework of the “Promotionskolleg: Wissensmanagement und Selbstorganisation im Kontext hochschulischer Lehr- und Lernprozesse” at the Center for Research on Higher Education and Faculty Development of the University of Dortmund for several months we would like to share some of our experiences and thoughts. We, that is to say, Gerasimova Julia (Thesis “Teaching staff consulting as a factor of school development”, Novgorod State University), Pevzner Vitaliy (Thesis “Pedagogical Potential of Student Self-Government in the Modern University”, Novgorod State University).

Of course it is worth noting that education abroad is rather a normal phenomenon, nowadays. Thousands of students, postgraduates, scholars and scientists find their way to the other countries in order to advance educational level, to conduct a research, to get acquainted with different cultural customs and national values. At the present writing, so called Bologna process is gathering strength, forming common European educational space and erasing universities’ boundaries.

An outstanding example of international cooperation examples is the educational partnership between Russian Federation and Germany. Social institutions such as Goethe’s Cultural centre in Moscow, German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD), and numerous projects between universities (Velikiy Novgorod - Dortmund, Velikiy Novgorod - Bielefeld, Rostov-on-Don - Dortmund and so on) vastly extend cultural and educational exchange possibilities between those two countries.

Due to the longstanding amicable contacts between universities of Velikiy Novgorod and Dortmund we were afforded (in the framework of Alexander Herzen program) an opportunity to become PhD students in Germany. That happened shortly after starting the Russian “Aspirantura”(postgraduate school). That gave us a unique possibility to study western experience and the bibliographical resources related to our research topic.

Probably it is in a scholars’ blood to analyze, to classify, and to make different comparisons. To us as two young researchers this quality is also inherent. However, we would like to refrain from arid, detailed

differentiation with figures and percentage, but to deliver our thoughts, impressions, our personal perception of the “Promotionskolleg” as it is organized at the Center for Research on Higher Education and Faculty Development of the University in Dortmund and to give some information of the educational process in Russian “Aspirantura”

To begin with: Who are postgraduate students? In Germany as well as in Russia those people can be divided into two categories. The first one is yesterday’s higher school students, who have erewhile graduated from the university and have a great interest in research activities. And the second one is students, for whom the dissertation would be the next essential step of professional career (headmasters, teachers, psychologists, officials, businessmen and etc.)

The access requirements in Russia are the following: supervision agreement with one of the professors, successful examination pass (philosophy, foreign language, and speciality exam- pedagogies in our case), and sufficient scholastic and studying achievements.

Notwithstanding the apparent ease of scholastic guidance search, it could be not that simple. The point is that in today’s actual market conditions not many professors are interested in mentoring postgraduate students. On the one hand, a successful mentoring process requires time and responsibility, while on the other hand, lack of governmental financial support prevents scholars from mentoring a big number of students. Anyway, after fruitful negotiations with one’s future academic supervisor one has to surmount one more obstacle - exams. And only after passing the exams a commission decides whether to accept or refuse one’s application for the “Aspirantura” according to the shown results.

In Russia PhD students are obliged to attend special courses – so called “higher education school pedagogics”, where such problems as educational work, logic, structure and creation of dissertation, development of the research self-reflectiveness ability are trained. Those courses include 3 modules and as a rule attended by students during the first year of “Aspirantura”(sometimes during the second year). Moreover, 3 year Russian postgraduate school implies philosophy, foreign language and pedagogy qualifying examinations for the degree (in Russia they are called “doctoral minimum” exams). In this case the only difference between these exams and entrance testings is the requirement for the deeper knowledge of the subject. During “Aspirantura” the PhD students are obliged to

publish academic articles on the topic of their research. The strict rule says: the number of publications should be not less than three. After successful accomplishment of those steps the way to the thesis “Defence” (presentation) is open. We should mention that the process of “Defence” in Russia include two stages. The first one is the presentation at the sub-faculty meeting (in our case it is the chair of pedagogics) - it is called “Predefense” (as the result an author/ess may do some amendments, get prepared for potential questions). As a matter of fact the goal of the first stage is not only to edit the content of a thesis, but also to prepare a PhD student for the second stage - actual DEFENCE in front of so called dissertational counsel. The “Defence” itself is a public event, the relatives, friends of the researcher, people who are just interested in the discussed topic are admitted. Usually the banquet is offered after the presentation.

After the “Defence” is being done a decision of the counsel is sent to Moscow to the “supreme attestation commission”, which makes the final judgment about conferring the degree of the PhD. In Russia this degree is called – “candidate of scholastics” or “candidate of science”) But there are certain cases when a researcher must personally go to the Russian capital in order to clarify the questions and to remove the doubts, which could occur among the members of Moscow commission. Then PhD student expects a letter from Moscow, which should enclose a formal confirmation of a given degree. The PhD certificate is presented by the university rector at the university senate.

Both in Russia and Germany an academic degree is not only a formal recognition of one’s achievements, but also a personal, professional development, which opens vast opportunities in the world of higher education. There is no doubt, that apart from numerous advantages one can detect some disadvantages in Russian and German postgraduate schools. Despite this fact academic education is valuable and useful.

It is not that easy to find one’s specific profile as a young academic and thirst for knowledge, eagerness for the life-long learning not just ends in themselves but build one’s personal identity. As one Old Russian proverb says: “The one who seeks, always finds”. The higher education allows one to find oneself and to gain self-fulfilment through teaching and participating in local research projects, as well as in the international cooperation’s programmes.

Our participation in the Herzen program widely influenced our researches. Very useful and interesting we found the consultations made by Prof. Dr. Dr. hc. Johannes Wildt. The rich library stocks served as a base for the deep theoretical analysis. The

workshops organized within Promotionsstudium were very informative and interesting. In the framework of student movements and self-government study there were taken interviews which represented the unique material for our empirical research. There were developed friendly contacts with the leaders of German student movement, which resulted into elaboration of the exchange project between Russian and German student activists.

In the framework of research “Teaching staff consulting as a factor of school development” very useful was the collaboration with colleagues from School Development Institute (Institut fuer Schulentwicklungsforchung).

Theoretical materials and professional consultations given by Nils Berkemeyer’s as well as interview with Uwe Lehmpfuhl were very important in the context of School Development research.

Our stay in Germany gave us also rare opportunities to get acquainted with many other PhD students from all over the world, to share opinions concerning our researches, to learn different cultures, ways of living and thinking.

Because an academic occupation is both challenging and exiting, we wish everyone who is diligently working in this sphere the patience required to be successful, in order to make a contribution to society and their country’s development.

These months in HDZ will stay in our memories vividly for a long time and we are once more thankful to the people, who surrounded and supported us, who gave us new ideas and new research perspectives. That is what we call the dialogue of the cultures, international educational cooperation.

Interesting facts:

1. According to the sociological research, 40 per cent of the people, who are learning German as a foreign language, live in Russia.
2. Germany is in the first three countries by the number of foreign students studying at the higher education institutions. (www.daad.ru, www.herzen.spb.ru, *Leben und Studieren in Deutschland. Hinweise und Informationen für ausländische Studierende an deutschen Hochschulen.* DAAD, 2002).

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