

THE SCHOOL OF ADVANCED STUDIES: THE FIRST OF ITS KIND

(English translation of an interview published 10 January 2017 at <https://www.utmn.ru/presse/ekspertnoe-mnenie/300920/>)

The University of Tyumen is opening a new subdivision, the School of Advanced Studies (SAS). The SAS will focus on both research and education, with its BA program aimed at talented applicants interested in studying complex social sciences and humanities disciplines as well as biological sciences and information technologies. Doctor Andrei Scherbenok, the director of SAS, has shared the concept of this new educational initiative with us.

Andrei Valerievich, the School of Advanced Studies (SAS) will begin accepting applicants this year. What is so unique about this project?

The School of Advanced Studies (SAS) is a new structural subdivision of the University of Tyumen – it's unlike anything there before, having been created completely from scratch. It aims to set an example for other departments and, among other things, improve the quality of teaching and academic productivity. We therefore built the school from the ground up, and set the bar very high from the start: our instructors will be people who are already actively engaged in research, both in the Russian and global sphere. We are currently working on employing modern educational formats that are conducive to the traditions of liberal arts education. As a seminar-based program, more than 80% of the coursework will be limited to classes of no more than twenty students to allow for interactivity and active engagement with the learning process. Every student will be able to choose their major after the second year. During the first two years, all the students will study together as a cohort, and only at the end will they decide what they want to specialize in – economics, sociology, or, for example, media studies.

The coursework for the academic majors themselves is to take up around one third of the entire baccalaureate degree curriculum, while another third are electives that provide an individualized educational path. The final third – what we call the “core” curriculum – will be compulsory coursework designed to create a multidisciplinary outlook; it will emphasize critical and analytical thinking, the ability to navigate global trends, and communicative competencies, among other things.

What is SAS looking for in its applicants? As I understand, only the most talented high school students should apply to SAS.

We, like all Russian universities, focus primarily on the criteria of the Unified State Exams (USE) for admissions. For the time being, of course, we cannot say what our required scores will be – only that they will be higher than the average for the University of Tyumen. Our goal is to attract the most talented applicants from Tyumen, different regions of Russia, and even different countries – but most importantly, those who are

planning to study in Moscow, Saint Petersburg, or abroad. Therefore it is the best metropolitan universities that are our main competitors.

Is it possible for your colleagues at UT to teach in SAS?

The majority of full-time professors hired by SAS are coming to Tyumen from different cities and countries. Of course, we encourage our UT faculty to apply as well. Last autumn, we held a series of open lectures at the university, one of which was intended to profile the kind of research undertaken by colleagues at our university and understand which of these studies can fit into our school, because SAS is still a research-based subdivision. In the search for faculty from Russia, we are looking, first of all, at their activities in global academic networks: we cannot afford to have researchers who are isolated from global research contexts, nor those who cannot effectively communicate with international instructors. An important function of SAS is that it is a window to the world: we will create a space in which it will be possible to participate in some of the most pressing global debates on social science and humanities topics, right here in Russia.

But we are also paying considerable attention to teaching skills. In the spring, trainers certified by Bard College will lead training for future professors who will teach the required “Writing and Thinking” module. The only other place you will find such a course in Russia is at the Saint Petersburg State University College of Liberal Arts and Sciences (also under the Bard model). There the course is called “Post-Exam Rehabilitation,” because the entrance exam (USE) drums into incoming students that they need to learn a large amount of information in order to adequately answer the questions. In the first two months of their studies, our incoming undergraduates will study (or perhaps review) how to think and reflect, how to take new materials, evaluate them critically, and write one’s own analytical text.

The project is called the School of Advanced Studies – accordingly, will the students also be conducting research? At what stage will they be immersed in this?

We are trying to push back against the devaluation of the word “research.” In Russia, as in many other countries, research is used to refer to almost anything. In our understanding of the word, “research” is a very difficult process that incorporates all aspects of scientific method, something that first-year students typically don’t perform no matter how talented they may be. Nevertheless, by the fourth year, all students will have taken a research seminar related to their major, in which the students are to write their first academic research work. But this will be a real research project, not simply literature review or mechanical data collection. At the same time, they will write a number of analytical essays and work with student data beginning from September of their first year – this is an inseparable part of our educational format.

The training profiles listed on the SAS website include sociology and anthropology, economics, cultural studies, theatre, and media studies, along with informational technology, history, and biology. Are there scholarships available in all fields?

Applicants to SAS may be enrolled into one of seven fields, corresponding to different sets of the Unified State Exam (USE). In each of these seven fields, the eight best students will study free of charge – either at the expense of the “budgetary” space, or at the expense of the university or a sponsor. Thereafter, profile training for students begins after the second year and it need not relate to the focus area of their high school studies. In total, we are planning to accept around 100 people, so more than half will be scholarship students.

There are no similar programs in Russian universities. On which models are you basing your work?

Generally speaking, no other higher education establishment in the world offers this exact course format. There are certain elements of other courses that we have taken into consideration while creating our own unique composition. For example, there are two main parts to our core requirements of the program for all students, similar to those of the core curricula of Columbia University in New York and the University of Chicago. I myself spent a few years at Columbia University where I taught a “Great Books” class. The idea is that all baccalaureate students, regardless of their future specialization, must take part in a great discussion, along with the most outstanding writers as well as philosophical and social thinkers throughout the centuries. We will have such a course (perhaps two) in our school. This is more or less reminiscent of the so-called “general education component” found in normal Russian universities, where, however, it is as a rule aligned with lectures on philosophy or history, which very few people attend. Often, students just turn in an essay that they may have even downloaded from the Internet. Our own “Great Books” course is just a seminar in which students read a small number of texts, but each book will take up about 3-4 seminars, allowing everyone to really enter into a private dialogue with the authors, understand how philosophical, artistic, and scientific texts are constructed, and in the end write about this theme. Other core curricula, based on the University of Chicago model, include a compulsory course entitled “Numerical Methods” and “Problems in the Modern Natural Sciences” because we believe all students should know basic math, IT, and science.

However, one “core” course that they do not have in Chicago or New York is a class entitled “Current Global Problems.” This class will consist of a series of short modules, which will include lectures by invited guests from both corporate and academic worlds, along with discussion seminars dealing with global events. SAS hopes to bring together the classical and the avant-garde. We have plenty of classical components already in place at our university, but on the other hand, we hope to link our work to real-world issues.

If you are talking about Russian examples from a format point of view, the closest analogy would be the aforementioned School of Liberal Arts and Sciences at Saint Petersburg State University (SPSU), the Smolny College. Nonetheless, there are many substantial differences between them and us: namely, Smolny is primarily a study institute rather than a research institute, and there the faculty are predominantly ordinary instructors from the different colleges at SPSU. However, SAS is also a research center where instructors are selected based on their global research capacities, and pushing for modernity and relevance to their courses.

It is generally assumed that applicants are usually quite interested in where they might be able to get practical experience – how is SAS approaching this issue?

Yes, there will be a practical component, and its main format will resemble an internship or summer school. We recommend that all students participate in summer schools at different universities in Russia and abroad. SAS will be very mobile. Professors will come to Tyumen and students will travel to different cities and countries.

You mentioned that the professors coming to SAS are not only Russian, but also international. Does this mean that priority for student recruitment will be given primarily to those with adequate language training?

We discussed this question a lot. This, of course, is an obvious step – put English language proficiency as an entrance requirement – but we decided not to do this in order not to lose a part of our talented applicants. But because there will be English language instructors who don't speak Russian, we have set a condition: those that do not have sufficient English-language proficiency upon entering must achieve a level which allows for conversation on academic themes by their second year. Those who have enough English upon their entrance into the first year may immediately begin the part of their studies with international professors in the English language.

Upon graduating SAS, what can these young specialists expect to do? Where can they work?

We believe that a bachelor's degree cannot give one a high level of specialization. Over the course of four years it is, of course, possible to master a profession, but this is not our particular goal. If you want to work in any complex field, you will need to continue studying after completing your undergraduate degree. We are not trying to make a baccalaureate-specialist program to teach obvious algorithms to graduates who will immediately go to work in an area that hasn't changed for decades. We don't see that work as very attractive from the perspective of remuneration, nor from the perspective of self-realization. Therefore, we are seeking people who want to study further. One option is to enter into a master's program and obtain advanced professional training there. SAS graduates – through their education, English-language competencies, and academic involvement as provided by our faculty – will be readily accepted into the best master's programs in different universities and countries.

Another option is to go to work and learn independently at the same time. Our graduates will possess an advantage over those who spent four years in a normal specialized baccalaureate program. There's an old joke that when a university graduate goes to work, the boss immediately tells him: forget everything you learned at university because we are going to teach you everything once again. This won't apply to us because, first of all, our graduates won't have much to forget since we don't plan to teach outdated mechanical knowledge which is of no interest to the student or his future employer. Secondly, SAS will teach universal competencies which surveys have shown us are most in demand by employers. Most importantly, we want our students to learn

how to learn. In this way our graduates, even if they don't go on to a master's program, can effectively adapt to the constantly changing requirements of a job.

Concerning the education process that we will see in SAS, there is an especially wide range of courses the students can choose. Can you expand upon this?

Concerning the selection of academic courses, there are several different approaches that universities can take. At one of the spectrum, students can generally choose the entire academic course load without restrictions. At the other end, you have a very strict program in which academic departments decide everything for the students. We decided to choose a happy medium: one third of the academic workload consists of compulsory "core" courses. Nevertheless, even here we recommend several options – for example, in the required coursework for the arts, students will choose the arts program that they want to focus on – for instance, theater or painting. Another third of the academic course load will be dedicated to courses that students choose entirely independently. SAS will offer around fifty such uniquely authored courses, designed by our professors in accordance with their unique competencies. The final third will be dedicated to the students' profiles – their specializations. Within each profile there will be 5-6 required courses, and several others from a recommended selection of courses.

This is a big project, both interesting and ambitious. Why did they decide to create it here at the University of Tyumen?

Simply put, the University of Tyumen has the will and the desire to make a big push forward academically. UT's advantage is that they are not afraid to experiment and change.

Where will SAS be located?

SAS will be located in a separate building, built to global standards, that is currently under construction. We anticipate that the doors will open by September 1, 2017. We mainly need a compact lecture hall, smaller rooms for seminars and independent and group work, and a good cafe where the students can talk or study. We are looking for a balance between intimacy and transparency, including glass doors and walls, in order to create an open intellectual space for all.

Addendum

Andrei Scherbenok holds two PhDs – one from Saint Petersburg University and a second from the University of California at Berkeley. From 2006 to 2009, Scherbenok worked as a researcher, professor, and member of the academic society of humanitarian sciences at Columbia University, and from 2009 to 2011 he was an international researcher and recipient of the Newton British Academy fellowship, where he taught at Sheffield University. From 2012, Scherbenok has worked as a professor of practice at the SKOLKOVO business school.