

## Comments to external evaluation results of the Faculty of Sociology

The document entitled “External Evaluation of BA/MA Programs in Sociology held in Higher School of Economics, Moscow” (evaluators - Dr. Samuel A. Greene, King’s College London, and Prof. Dr. Katharina Bluhm, Free University of Berlin) is a good help in improving the quality of teaching as well as programs and Faculty management at the Faculty.

Colleagues were been asked to combine a desk research of a couple of documents sent in English translation in advance (like ...) as well as to conduct a series of interviews with Faculty administration, staff, students and alumni (see attached) during a short term stay at the Faculty.

The general statements of the expertise should be viewed as very positive. The colleagues mentioned that:

- *‘the Faculty of Sociology at the HSE is, without a doubt, the strongest sociology group in Russia and the former Soviet Union and among the best in Eastern Europe (alongside, perhaps, the University of Ljubljana and the Central European University). Moreover, the Faculty has re-established its teaching and research programmes on the same foundation of sociological knowledge and thought as the world’s leading departments, allowing, for the first time in Russia, the substantive and substantial mobility of people and ideas. Given the history, this is a tremendous achievement, the significance of which should not be underestimated’;*
- *‘Each program has clearly set goals and makes them transparent in their documentation. The criteria for the assessment of student work are appropriate. They slightly vary according the varying intention of the programs. It is hard to name them all. Additional criterions were not provided. But the satisfaction of students we talked to was high. The faculty regular evaluates the courses by students’*
- *‘The Faculty runs a robust programme for the collection of student feedback, which does appear to be a valuable source of information and criticism both to Faculty managers and teachers’*
- *‘ the BA curriculum is ambitious and of high quality. While ensuring a strong background in sociological concepts and methods, it provides a greater degree of choice to students than is generally available at the BA level in Russia, significantly enriching the student experience. If the BA curriculum differs significantly from its global peers, it is primarily a result of ambition: the programme provides a greater range and depth of concepts and methods than would generally be taught at the BA level in most Western sociology departments. While this is laudable, and while students report a high degree of satisfaction with this depth and breadth, the unfortunate result is limited access for students to disciplines and approaches outside of sociology. While BA students are introduced to economics, psychology, philosophy and law, they appear to have little or no opportunity for exposure to literature, political science, international relations, or the natural sciences’;*
- *‘At the level of senior Faculty management (the Dean and Assistant Deans), there appears to be a robust and thoughtful process of curricular review and evaluation, with a constant eye on the need to deliver the most appropriate programmes to students. The relevant managers are aware of the latest conceptual and pedagogical developments and are eager to make sure that the Faculty’s students have access to the best practices in the field. The Faculty’s management pursues innovation in the interest of quality and effectiveness, remaining open to new ideas and critical reflection’;*
- *The opportunities provided by the Faculty for practical experience, both structured and un-structured, for real-world exposure and for professionally oriented extra-curricular activities are stellar and, in many ways, are the Faculty’s greatest strength. Through relationships with leading Russian and international social research agencies, through the University’s own research groups and laboratories, and through other channels, students have ample opportunity to develop their knowledge and skills ‘in the field’;*

*leading to a demonstrable improvement in the educational experience, the more effective assimilation of knowledge, and greater prospects for professional development and career advancement’*,

- *The advisory mechanisms in place at the Faculty seem to be adequate, and students have access to multiple channels of advice, through the Dean’s office, the registrar’s office, the various academic units, and their tutors’*,
- *‘The library’s holdings are adequate to support the needs of students and are, indeed, the best available in Russia. Holdings of older English-language books and journal archives not available electronically are lacking, but the curricula rely primarily on electronically available materials and the library’s current electronic journal, e-book and database holdings are first class’*
- *‘Every student has an opportunity to provide detailed written feedback on all taught courses, the results of which are archived in each academic unit and in the Dean’s office and are available for review. The process appears to be comprehensive and transparent’*,
- *‘All academic staff meet the standards of the HSE, and an increasing number of staff are internationally competitive. The Faculty is home to an astonishing range of academic specialties, significantly broader than at most sociology departments globally, which tend to focus on a small handful of core research themes. By contrast, the Faculty of Sociology at the HSE has set about recruiting the best and the brightest of Russian sociology, together with a growing cohort of internationally hired staff, leading to the accumulation of a very broad spectrum of conceptual and theoretical interests’*,
- *‘Academic staff in the Faculty are well tied into the sociological community in Russia, including various professional societies and the Institute of Sociology of the Russian Academy of Sciences, and numerous private sector research organizations. In addition, an increasing number of staff are active in international research circles, including the American and European Sociological Associations. No other faculty in Russia has such a concentration of nationally and internationally recognized working sociologists’*,
- *‘the Faculty collects student feedback systematically, while collection of alumni and employer feedback is substantial but seemingly on a more ad hoc basis. Programme managers and teachers are aware of the feedback received by programmes as a whole and courses individually and have every opportunity to incorporate this feedback into their work’*,
- *‘The Faculty of Sociology does remarkably well with remarkably few resources. It is woefully under-resourced in terms of teaching and office space, a problem that represents a failure of the University rather than a failure of the Faculty (and, indeed, is endemic to the University as a whole). The Faculty appears to make maximally efficient student-facing use of the space that it does have, with the brunt of the problem borne by the teaching staff, too few of whom have office space. Other equipment, primarily computers, is limited by the available space, but is generally sufficient at current student numbers’*.

The most important results we should accept and elaborate in a mid term agenda of improving are as follows:

1. Scarcity of resources – library rooms both for students to work between teaching as well as for fellows,
2. Classrooms (quality and equipment) – too poor for a national research university
3. Level of visualization, interactive and distant learning forms
4. Publication activity
5. Research funding
6. Availability of Information and Transparency

However, we should admit that points 1-3 and 5 are fully subject of general improvement of facilities at the level of the university, while p. 4 and 6 are to the biggest part to be solved at the

Faculty level. Publication activity: the Faculty is performing at the mid level among the faculties of the HSE, however, having in mind the quality of staff and the big and growing number of colleagues hired on international labor market, the situation should improve more significantly. For this reason, measures should be invented at the level of the Faculty administration to stipulate joint papers with both international partners as well as with these colleagues already started to work at the Faculty – while concentrating activities in a few areas of excellence to achieve a synergetic effect (economic sociology, urban sociology, socio-legal studies, on-line research etc.). The role of chairs in this process should be revisited – as until now they seemed not to promote a linkage of their fellows with more experienced authors.

Information, transparency: during and in the result of the expertise of the World bank as well as of the mentioned mission of experts chosen by the Faculty themselves, a major work to collect, systematize and translate most important documents was done, Its publishing and updating on the website of the Faculty as well as in some relevant groups in social networks managed by the Faculty should improve the level of transparency for international and internal colleagues and possible collaborators.

There are also some more concrete critical points mentioned by the colleagues:

- The BA program is structured better than the MA where differences between programs are either not clear or raise more questions than answers – a *‘revision of the existing Masters programs’* is advised;
- The quality of management on the level of the chairs should be improved;
- *‘The academic staffing numbers at the Faculty of Sociology are sufficient for the delivery of existing programmes and, to some degree, even excessive’*;
- More synergetic action (between chairs, between Russian and foreign fellows) is wishful;
- Feedback of students’ assessment of courses and teaching quality should be made less dependent from teaching staff reaction etc.

Some of the weak points are clear to the Faculty, and there were been already some measures invented to improve both on the HSE as well as on the Faculty level – like a gradual diminishing of full time faculty (until 2020, more than 3 times) and a closer integration of research staff and part time external experts into the educational process; a shift from Faculty to the program based model of organization, a restructuring of the unified study office into BA and MA study offices (PhD program administration and PhD office is coming soon); there is the idea to better conduct the electives of all of MA programs to enable students to take courses from any program when relevant for their individual study track etc.; a assistant manager to help international colleagues to get integrated into the Faculty is established; a new international MA is to be started in 2014-2015 and another one is in establishing etc.

However, there are also some points of the expertise which the Faculty should comment:

- The BA program has a clear structure with a step-by-step differentiation of students of the advanced semesters in 3 specializations – general sociology; methods of data collection and analysis; economic sociology. Within the main course of General sociology all the main sub-areas of Sociology are introduced which enables students to focus of some of them during the last stage of the BA (7-7 semesters).
- There is an absolute domination of written forms of examinations on all levels and in all modules – which some teaching staff members even find excessive as some students seem to be less prepared for any kind of oral presenting than for written forms at the end of their study.
- *‘A list of learning outcomes that would be more readily and more transparently linked to the programmes’ skills-oriented outcomes’* is existing. The problem is not the absence of the list but to convince fellows to switch from the old known methodic approach to the competence driven one – which is rather not a problem of a list but of incentives and monitoring.