

## Some Peculiarities of Universities in Russia

Though demonstrating plenty of features that are similar to the Dutch system, universities in Russia have some slight but curious peculiarities in their organisation and their curriculums.

I had the good fortune to be acquainted with those educational institutes in both countries. I was born in Russia and after school I graduated from the medical university in Moscow. Then I worked as a cardiologist in a very big hospital for five years and specialised in children's cardioidiseases. I got great satisfaction from my work. Also I had interesting hobbies such as participating in a literary club, where Russian, English, American and Chinese literature, mainly poetry, was discussed and creative writings of the members of the club were recited. It came about that in five years after graduation I moved to the Netherlands. Now I live in Bergen op Zoom and make some efforts to return to my profession and my hobbies. At first I wanted to rejoin some literary club in the town but having not found any, I decided to organise one. Realising that this idea demands a serious attitude and great knowledge, I have become an a la carte student at the faculty of English language and culture at Leiden University. I am happy to attend its literary and language courses and also the courses of Dutch literature and language at Dutch studies. All of them are very interesting and useful. Besides this I am curious to see how the process of studying is organised and sometimes I remember my experience at the medical university in Russia.

Russian universities have a system of entrance examinations, that differ widely in kind and number (usually 3 or 4), depending on the specialisation of the faculty. Every faculty strictly takes a definite number of students, chosen from the participants who passed the entrance exams. The admission is determined by the Ministry of Education. So if a young person graduated school with distinction and passed the entrance examinations successfully, it's not guaranteed that he will join university. If for instance from 300 people, who have coped with the exams, only 150 can be allowed to enter, only those with the highest marks will be selected. Some faculties have recently begun to select students by counting their school examinations. Probably medical universities will practice it one day too.

Another peculiarity of the system is that by law every faculty, mathematical, physical and medical, has a Russian literature

exam. For instance, we had a writing chemistry exam, an oral biology exam and a literary exam. The faculties of the humanities have an optional examination of foreign literature, which we study at school too, but faculties of natural and physical sciences check only knowledge of Russian literature and language.

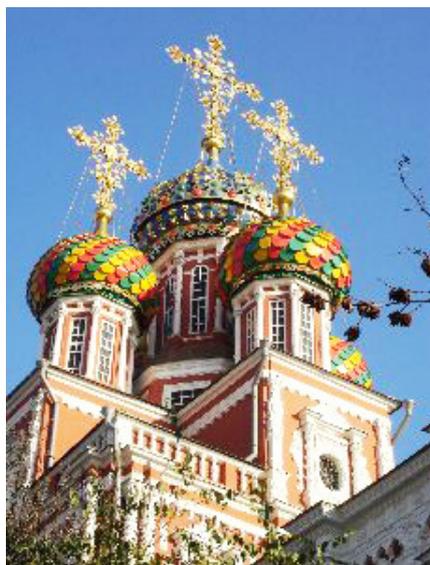
Having come to our literary exam, we got five themes for an essay of works of Russian writers and poets. The themes were always kept in secret till the examination but they were formed on the works that were studied at schools. We had to choose one of those themes and write an essay of it not less than six pages long without using any books or dictionaries. We were given four hours to finish our work. The set of themes had to include questions about a writer and a poet and a so-called 'free' theme, that issued a statement for a discussion based on several literary texts. There were themes like:

- > Perception and interpretation of A. A. Fet's poem "The night was shining. The garden was full of the moon..."
- > The quest for the meaning of life by young people of the first third of the 19th century (by A. S. Pushkin's Evgeniy Onegin and M. U. Lermontov's A Hero of Our Time")
- > The usage of antithesis in War and Peace by L. N. Tolstoy and Crime and Punishment by F. M. Dostoyevsky
- > Temporary and pretended allies of Basarov in Fathers and Sons by I. S. Turgenev
- > "The creator is always reflected in his creation, often against his will" N. M. Karamzin (reciting one or several works of Russian literature)

The examination was checked thoroughly for good orthography and punctuation. So it was absolutely not enough to debate the topic correctly. All kinds of orthographic and stylistic inaccuracy and punctuation mistakes led to a lower mark.

Future students were selected from the group of people, who passed all the exams and collected a certain sum of marks. If a lot of people got the same sum but only a few of them could be admitted as students, then those who had already worked in hospitals as nurses for two and more years, and people who had won annual literature, chemistry or biology competitions at schools had privileges. According to the law, orphans still are always admitted in all, even medical, universities without any exams.

People who passed the selection became students. Our schedule differed much from the Dutch. We studied from 8 or 9 a. m. till 4 or 5 p. m. with breaks between lessons from 5 till 20 minutes. After classes we were supposed to do our homework, which we always had. We studied six days a week (on Sundays we had a weekend) and our semesters were considerably longer than the ones here. The first semester lasted from the first of September till the first of January, and the second one from February till the middle of June. The exams began immediately after the end of a semester but we had about three free days before every exam for preparing. The number of exams was different in each semester. I remember quite calm sessions with five exams and rather busy times with ten exams. In July we had practice in hospitals with an exam at the end of the month. Summer holidays started at the beginning of August and lasted till the first of September.



The curriculum was always fixed for all students for every year. There were no minor or major subjects, no possibility for taking some of the subjects and leaving the others for the next year. Traditional teaching methods were lectures and tutorials; all of them were obligated for all the students. Only a disease, confirmed by a document from a doctor, was accepted as a valid reason from being absent from a lesson. Any personal circumstances, not feeling well or busy time at other subjects were no good arguments for our teachers. But even having proper documentation that explained missed lessons, we had to compensate for all of them by coming to a teacher after the classes in the evenings and at clinical departments on Sundays in order to fulfil the programme of the subject. Considering how many lessons we had every day, it was very difficult to compensate for them and one week of a cold could cause someone one month of trouble. Every student needed a permission to do exams. This permission was only given if we had accomplished the whole programme. We should have successfully passed all tests during the semester, handed all assignments, compensated any missed lesson and received positive marks. We regularly got marks at usual lessons for answering homework and had to compensate negative marks in the same way as missed lessons. Even if a student succeeded in doing all subjects, except of one, he would not be allowed to go to any exams. Because of absence from some lessons all the exams could be endangered. A failed exam could be redone but in case of

a next failure students were not allowed to repeat this subject the next year. In order to continue education, students had to pass exams. But if a student became seriously ill and there was no hope that he would get well quickly, then he could receive a permission to stay at home for one year and then after the recovery he could complete the programme.

Our curriculum, apart from specialist subjects, included obligated humanitarian and other subjects. We studied philosophy for two and a half years, history, architecture, cultural science, history of religions, English and Latin, also political science, sociology, jurisprudence,

economics, psychology, ecology and we did sport and skiing in winters. All these subjects were closed with exams.

Philosophy is a compulsory subject in all Russian universities and it's studied in detail by future doctors, engineers and journalists. It was a very interesting experience for me. I remember our exciting and thought-provoking discussions and hot arguments, and our puzzled silence when all debates ended in stalemate. The use of that subject in our work and in everyday life is difficult to overestimate. Thanks to that knowledge, for example, I chose a topic for my assignment at Literature 2: English Literature 1550-1700. I compared literary techniques in Plato's Republic and Thomas More's Utopia, what I wanted to do for a long time because Plato was always interesting to me, not only as a philosopher but also as a talented writer.

All departments at our university had to maintain a club for students who wanted to learn about a subject more than was planned by our programme. Those clubs were led by professors and were not meant for socialising but looked just like an extra tutorial that dealt with a question concerning the subject. Some of those clubs were quite successful, for instance our philosophical club, in which I participated. It was popular among the students and sometimes, when topics were original, even people who had already graduated university, rejoined us.

These are the peculiarities in the organisation of universities in Russia. The rest is more or less the same as here, the same active student life and commitment.

*By Elena Morozova*