

# **Reimagining Russian Higher Education: Could an experiment in progressive education in Siberia help transform Russia's universities?**

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## **ABSTRACT**

In Tyumen, a Siberian city located some 1,000 miles east of Moscow, a radical experiment in Russian higher education is taking place. The School of Advanced Studies (SAS) is an institute that is attempting to bring multidisciplinary, liberal arts-influenced education to Russia. Founded in 2017, SAS operates as an autonomous institution within the state-funded University of Tyumen (UTMN). This article will analyze SAS's current educational model through data and interviews with faculty, administration, and students. It is divided into five parts. The first section offers background information. We explain how SAS was founded, its source of funding, and why liberal education is an outlier in Russia. The middle three sections take a deeper look at the institution from the perspectives of the administration, students, and faculty. We document their observations about the SAS experiment, highlighting their differing views on what they believe the institute's mission should be. These sections also analyze which elements of the SAS model are working so far and which ones need further development. The final section sums up our findings: how is SAS, a progressive, liberal experiment, able to exist in a traditional, generally inflexible Russian education system? So far, what are the institution's successes and failures? And finally, is SAS a fluke experiment, or is there potential to create similar institutions throughout Russia?

## **I. BACKGROUND**

### **The Context: Traditional Russian Education vs. the SAS Model**

Russian universities across the nation require students to know what they will study before they begin their undergraduate degrees. Switching one's major is a thorny, bureaucratic process that almost always requires students to repeat a year of college or start over as freshmen in their new department. Students are also rarely allowed to take courses outside of their major, and their class schedule is assigned to them by their department each year.

SAS operates on an entirely different model. It offers an interdisciplinary education, where students have the autonomy and resources to study what interests them. The institute incorporates elements of liberal arts theory into its approach. For example, students are required to take core courses in STEM and the humanities. But SAS's educational model is generally more liberal than what we find at most Western liberal arts universities. Dr. Daniel Kontowski, Head of Education at SAS, explained the school's concept: "We're not just transferring educational models from the U.K. or the U.S. to SAS. This institute is really based on the idea of going beyond the traditional, fixed disciplines that you find in academia." For instance, SAS has

no departments. This helps preserve the interdisciplinary mission of the institute in two ways: 1) professors are required to work with each other across their disciplines to produce research and design courses; and 2) departments are not competing with each other for resources, funding, and student enrollment.

Adopting innovative methods like this makes SAS what is known in the education field as a “greenfield institution.” Greenfields are schools that are purposefully designed to stray from the norms of traditional education and research in order to form a fresh, progressive approach to learning. In other words, SAS is a startup.

The four-year bachelor’s degree program at SAS requires students to take core courses in a range of subjects, from philosophy and literature to science and IT. For freshmen and sophomores, the core makes up two-thirds of the curriculum, while the last third is a panoply of electives that students can choose from. In their third year, students select their major, a big difference from traditional Russian universities. After that, students’ schedules become a mixture of required courses for their major and electives of their choice.<sup>1</sup> The institute also encourages students to think critically, with 80% of its classes taught in a seminar format. That is in striking contrast with traditional Russian education, with its emphasis on lecture classes and memorization and where the teacher is often an unquestioned authority figure.

Perhaps the most extreme difference between SAS and traditional Russian universities is that courses at SAS are taught in English.<sup>2</sup> There are two main reasons for this. First, most of the school’s professors are neither Russian nor Russian-speakers. SAS’s 30 permanent professors hail from 12 countries, a fact the institute is quite proud of. The first thing you see when you walk into the university’s sparkling lobby is a large map of the world with dots highlighting the places where the faculty received their doctorate degrees: Harvard University, Johns Hopkins University, Sorbonne University, and Oxford University, among others. The second reason for using English is it makes it easier to share the research SAS produces with the global academic community. Additionally, should students want to study outside of Russia to earn their postgraduate degrees, the SAS education would prepare them to do so.

However, the institution’s most exceptional feature is also one of its greatest weaknesses. The English curriculum has created gaping systemic problems, since incoming freshmen arrive with all different levels of English proficiency, from beginner to upper intermediate. The administration has not figured out an effective way to narrow the language divide, an issue we will address later in this paper.

## **Founding Figures and Financial Support, or How Liberal Arts Came to Siberia**

SAS is largely the vision of one man: Andrey Shcherbenok, founder and Director of SAS. Born and educated in St. Petersburg, Dr. Shcherbenok decided to move to the United States for his

<sup>1</sup> There is also a 4th-year core course called “Effective Communications” and two year-long research seminars in years 3 and 4.

<sup>2</sup> There are a couple of exceptions to this. Physical education is taught in Russian. In a core course called “Great Books,” works by Russian authors are read in the original Russian. A first-year core course called Quantitative Methods is taught in Russian, but the faculty is in talks about whether to switch the working language to English beginning in the fall semester of 2020.

doctorate degree. He received his Ph.D. in Film Studies in 2006 from the University of California, Berkeley's Department of Rhetoric, a multidisciplinary department that promotes coursework flexibility. After graduating from Berkeley, he was a Mellon postdoctoral fellow at Columbia University from 2006 to 2009. In 2012, he began work as an associate professor at SKOLKOVO Education Development Center, a think tank-like subset of the private business school Moscow School of Management SKOLKOVO. The mission of SKOLKOVO's Education Center is to realize progressive experiments in Russian higher education. They do this through hosting programs and online courses for university and school administrators on how to implement systemic changes in their institutions. The Center also conducts research and implements its own programs. One example is SKOLKOVO's Global Education Programme, a collaboration with the Ministry of Science and Higher Education of the Russian Federation. This program funds Russian citizens' postgraduate education at universities outside of Russia with the agreement that the students will enter the Russian workforce upon completion of their education. Dr. Shcherbenok's time studying at UC Berkeley and Columbia gave him the idea to create a liberal arts institution in Russia, and he brought that vision with him to SKOLKOVO.

In the eyes of Dr. Shcherbenok, one of SAS's larger goals is to help improve Russia's standing in the international academic world. Russia has 766 universities,<sup>3</sup> and 63% of Russians ages 25 to 34 have attained a tertiary level education, compared with an average of 44% across all member nations of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development.<sup>4</sup> However, only one Russian university, Lomonosov Moscow State University, makes it onto the top 100 of two of the world's most authoritative university rankings: Quacquarelli Symonds and Academic Rankings of World Universities (Moscow State University holds spot 84 and spot 87 on these rankings, respectively).

In an attempt to change how Russian universities are perceived internationally, the Russian Ministry of Science and Higher Education launched a program in 2013 called Project 5-100, or 5top100. The nominal goal of the initiative was to usher five Russian universities onto the international ranking lists mentioned above (as well as the Times Higher Education rankings) by 2020. Today, Moscow State University remains the only Russian university listed on the top 100 of these rankings, but Russian universities have been increasingly acknowledged in other ways. For example, on March 4, 2020, Quacquarelli Symonds released its subcategory ranking, "World University Rankings by Faculty and Subject." Twenty-two Russian universities, 13 of which are Project 5-100 participants, were included in the faculty ranking. Three 5-100 universities were in the top 100 on the subject list: the National Research University Higher School of Economics placed 59th for Social Sciences and Management, and Novosibirsk State University and the Moscow Institute of Physics and Technology took the 64th and 67th spots for the Natural Sciences.<sup>5</sup> Currently, 21 universities, including the University of Tyumen (the state university

<sup>3</sup> Russia has 500 public institutions and 266 private ones. Source: Project Atlas and Center for Sociological Research, RANEPa, "Russia - Higher Education Students & Institutions," *Institute of International Education (IIE)*, 2019, <https://www.iie.org/Research-and-Insights/Project-Atlas/Explore-Data/Russia>.

<sup>4</sup> OECD (2019), *Education at a Glance 2019: OECD Indicators*, OECD Publishing, Paris, September 10, 2019. <https://doi.org/10.1787/f8d7880d-en/> [https://www.oecd.org/education/education-at-a-glance/EAG2019\\_CN\\_RUS.pdf](https://www.oecd.org/education/education-at-a-glance/EAG2019_CN_RUS.pdf).

<sup>5</sup> Quacquarelli Symonds Top Universities "QS World University Rankings by Subject 2020," <https://www.topuniversities.com/subject-rankings/2020>; 5-100 Academic Excellence Project, "QS Rankings by

with which SAS is affiliated), receive money from Project 5-100 to create innovative educational experiments to improve the state of higher education in Russia.

SAS is funded primarily by 5top100 money. The grant is offered on a yearly basis, and each year SAS's host university, the University of Tyumen (UTMN), must reapply for funding. With this money, SAS is able to pay for its faculty, research, and designing new Master's degree programs.<sup>6</sup> The 5top100 project is set to end after 2020, but the Ministry of Science and Higher Education is well into the process of creating a new program to replace it in 2021. This new project is called the Program of Strategic Academic Leadership, and it is expected to run for the next 10 years. With a 52 billion-ruble budget, the program can fund up to 150 universities – many more than the 21 that benefitted from 5-100.<sup>7</sup> UTMN will be reapplying for funding under this new program, but even if it does not receive the grant, Dr. Shcherbenok is confident that the university will be able to cover SAS's costs. While it costs more to educate an SAS student than a UTMN student, SAS has fewer than 200 students. UTMN, meanwhile, has a budget big enough to educate close to 22,000 students, so funding SAS would be just a small fraction of UTMN's budget.<sup>8</sup>

## **The Debate Over Internationalization in Russian Higher Education**

One of the questions the 5top100 grant raises is why the Russian government would fund an institution that is so fundamentally at odds with its traditional education system. One reason is that universities which receive 5top100 money have little oversight from the government. Importantly, they are not mandated to spend it in any particular way. In fact, only 20% of the 5top100 money the University of Tyumen receives goes to fund SAS, though this 20% is able to cover all of SAS's expenses. However, the main and primary reason has to do with the desire to make Russian higher education more contemporary, so that research coming out of the country is considered more relevant in the global academic milieu. In other words, rankings are not the project's sole ambition.

Quelling Russia's brain drain crisis remains a big incentive in considering innovative educational structures. A 2018 report by researchers at the Russian Presidential Academy of National Economy and Public Administration (RANEPA) found that every year, about 100,000 Russians emigrate to developed countries. About 40% of these émigrés have bachelor's degrees or higher.<sup>9</sup> In November 2019, a poll by the independent Levada Center found that 53% of Russians

Faculty and Subject Place Project 5-100 Institutions Among World's Best," March 4, 2020, <https://5top100.ru/en/news/118938/>.

<sup>6</sup> SAS has two M.A. programs: "Digital Cultures and Media Production" and "Experimental Higher Education," the second of which is planned to launch in fall of 2020. However, this second program was designed for in-person training, so there is some uncertainty over whether the program will be able to begin on time if learning is still remote in the fall due to the coronavirus pandemic.

<sup>7</sup> "Valery Falkov: Research is made by structures not by individuals," *TASS*, June 4, 2020, <https://tass.ru/interviews/8644947>; Maria Nabirkina, "A bid for competition: New leadership program will include more than a hundred universities," *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, June 16, 2020, <https://rg.ru/2020/06/16/v-novuiu-programmu-liderstva-vojdut-bolee-sta-universitetov.html>.

<sup>8</sup> "Facts and Figures," *University of Tyumen*, <https://www.utmn.ru/en/about/utmn-today/facts-and-figures/>.

<sup>9</sup> "Russia's Brain Drain on the Rise Over Economic Woes -- Report," *The Moscow Times*, January 24, 2018, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2018/01/24/russias-brain-drain-on-the-rise-over-economic-woes-report-a60263>.

aged 18 to 24 would like to emigrate, a 16% percent increase from June 2019.<sup>10</sup> The Russian government hopes that by offering more appealing opportunities in higher education, young Russians will want to stay.

Another aim of Project 5-100 is for Russian higher education to undergo “internationalization,” or making universities more multicultural to bolster their reputation in the global academic community. This effort is perhaps most visible in the government’s push to recruit foreign students to Russian universities (as full-time students, not exchange students). One of the Ministry of Science and Higher Education’s goals is to host 710,000 international students by 2025. Currently, Russia has 334,497 foreign students.<sup>11</sup>

However, at the same time as the government says it wants to welcome more international students, it has also passed certain laws that make living in Russia harder, or at least less comfortable, for foreign students. In July 2018, the government changed the rules of registration for foreign students. In Russia, foreign students are required to register their passport at the address where they live. Before the 2018 law change, universities were allowed to register foreign students at the university’s address, but now if a student wants to rent an apartment instead of living in a dormitory they must find a landlord who will register their visa, something few landlords are willing to do.

The past few years have seen an intensifying tug-of-war within the Russian government over whether to make higher education more insular or more international. As one UTMN administrator told our research team, “The government has to decide if they want more internationalization or less, because under the current system they can’t do both.” But SAS administrators believe that Russian higher education will continue on the path of internationalization and adopting experimental approaches to higher education. Dr. Shcherbenok said this movement in Russian education has an “unstoppable momentum.”

This past winter saw another milestone for the forward momentum of Russian higher education. On January 21, 2020, Valery Falkov, former director of the University of Tyumen, became the new Minister of Science and Higher Education of the Russian Federation. Dr. Falkov’s support for SAS during his time as director of UTMN from 2013 to January 2020 is one of the main reasons why SAS exists today. Dr. Shcherbenok explained that in Russia’s conservative university system, it is rare to find a director who is willing to take risks, or even a director who acknowledges that the system needs improvement, but he found this at UTMN in Dr. Falkov. “You want a university that is a wasteland,” Dr. Shcherbenok said, describing the ideal environment for his liberal arts experiment. “And you need administrative leaders who want to improve the university and who *think* they need to improve it.”

Dr. Anastasia Rusakova, Associate Director of SAS, elaborated, “From the beginning, SAS was a collaboration between Andrey and the rector. He [Dr. Falkov] decided SAS should be created, and he gave us carte blanche.” Dr. Falkov had the weight of the university and connections to the local Tyumen government to make SAS a reality. The local government supported the endeavor,

<sup>10</sup> “Young Russians’ Desire to Leave Hits 10-Year High -- Poll,” *The Moscow Times*, November 26, 2019, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2019/11/26/young-russians-desire-to-leave-hits-10-year-high-poll-a68320>.

<sup>11</sup> “Russia - Higher Education Students & Institutions.”

and they now use SAS as a kind of “vitrine,” said Dr. Rusakova. The Tyumen Oblast government is located one block away from SAS, so sometimes politicians will bring visitors to SAS to show off the progressive educational experience that Tyumen has to offer. As another SAS administrator succinctly put it, “None of this would be possible without the rector.”

SAS administrators expect that having Dr. Falkov as Minister of Science and Higher Education will help their cause. Already, there have been inklings of change in educational policy coming out of Moscow. One of Dr. Falkov’s first acts in office was to rescind an order signed by the former Minister, Mikhail Kotyukov, in February 2019 that restricted communication between Russian and foreign scholars. The order required Russian researchers to submit reports every time they met with foreign colleagues, providing the names of all participants and a summary of the conversation. The order also stated that “at least two Russian researchers must be present at any meeting with foreigners, and contact with colleagues from abroad outside work hours is only allowed under the new rules with a supervisor’s permission.”<sup>12</sup> On February 10, 2020, Dr. Falkov revoked this order, saying the Ministry “is interested in cooperation [with foreign scientists] that will develop on the principles of open science.”<sup>13</sup>

Another indication of the shifting tides in Russian education appeared in President Vladimir Putin’s January 15, 2020 speech to the Federal Assembly. This speech received a lot of press coverage in the West, due to Mr. Putin’s suggested amendments to the Russian Constitution, a shuffling of the country’s legal system which would allow Mr. Putin to maintain presidential power for at least another decade after his term ends in 2024. Less remembered from this speech were Mr. Putin’s remarks about higher education. He promoted the possibility of allowing undergraduate students to change their major up to and after the end of their second year, one of the key tenets of the SAS model and an initiative SKOLKOVO has promoted, thanks in part to Dr. Shcherbenok. Mr. Putin said, “Today, the labor market is changing dynamically; new professions are constantly emerging and requirements for existing ones are becoming more complex. Higher education should respond quickly and flexibly to these needs.”<sup>14</sup>

On May 22 of this year, the Russian news agency TASS reported that the Ministry of Science and Higher Education was moving forward on this initiative. They are developing a new draft of Russia’s Federal Education Standards, which will allow students to change their major after their sophomore year.<sup>15</sup> However, it is unclear if these new regulations will allow students to make a drastic change in study. Whether, for example, a Russian literature major can become a math major or whether, for instance, a literature major may only shift to a specialty that is related to her original study like Russian history, remains unclear.

<sup>12</sup> Pavel Merzlikin, “Russia is imposing new restrictions on communication with foreign researchers,” *Meduza*, August 14, 2019, <https://meduza.io/en/feature/2019/08/14/russia-is-imposing-new-restrictions-on-communication-with-foreign-researchers-here-s-what-we-know-about-those-rules-so-far>.

<sup>13</sup> “Russian Ministry’s Controversial Order Restricting Scholars’ Contacts with Foreigners Rescinded,” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, February 10, 2020, <https://www.rferl.org/a/30426748.html>.

<sup>14</sup> Vladimir Putin, “Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly,” Presidential Executive Office, January 15, 2020, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/62582/> <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/62582>.

<sup>15</sup> “The Ministry of Science and Higher Education is developing a new draft of the Federal Education Standards, which will allow students to change their specialty,” TASS, May 22, 2020, <https://tass.ru/obschestvo/8543247>.

In his January speech to the Federal Assembly, Mr. Putin also mentioned the need for scientific researchers, engineers, and entrepreneurs to be allowed more freedom to carry out their work. “The technological entrepreneur should have the right to take a risk, so that failing to implement an idea will not automatically mean inappropriate use of funds and a possible criminal prosecution,” he said.<sup>16</sup> This statement could be a nod to the enduring conflict between the government’s desire to foster innovation and to increase isolation from the Western world, a tension demonstrated in the foreign researcher order Dr. Falkov tabled. However, with Dr. Falkov in office, there will likely be greater freedom to experiment in higher education.

## **II. THE ADMINISTRATION: GOALS, STRATEGIES, AND INSTITUTIONAL ALIGNMENT**

The School of Advanced Studies is still in its infancy, and, given its status as a small greenfield project with limited manpower, seems very much destined to succeed or fail based on the capacity and vision of its people. As such, we believe it is prudent to now turn our attention towards the administration of the project, first to its Director and Associate Director: Andrey Shcherbenok and Anastasia Rusakova.

### **SAS: View From the Top**

In our interviews with Directors Shcherbenok and Rusakova, each spoke about their approach to the project, their vision, and their goals for SAS. Dr. Shcherbenok started by explaining to us why SAS was unique, even by the metric of a SKOLKOVO initiative. First of all, it is the first high-level attempt in the Russian education sphere to shift from “imitation to innovation.” Dr. Shcherbenok does not see liberal arts as the end goal but as “an old system” which is in need of an overhaul. “It’s a necessary stage,” he told us during our interview, “and it’s a useful tool for experimentation.” It is in this way that SAS distinguishes itself from other institutions attempting to transform the pedagogy of Russian higher education. The Higher School of Economics in Moscow, for example, subscribes to what Dr. Shcherbenok would call the “imitative” model: attempting to replicate the ideology and practice of existing liberal arts institutions in the West within the Russian educational landscape. Unlike HSE (which Dr. Shcherbenok terms a “chief competitor,” despite its difference in approach), SAS is intended to be an innovator: a disruptive force which will overhaul established ways of thinking about higher education in Russia, not simply imitate the status quo in the West.

In our interviews with the administration, our research team often felt ourselves leaving the world of liberal arts and entering the world of key performance indicators, incubation periods, and “exponential growth.” Understanding this mindset certainly gave us invaluable context for some statistics about SAS which, at the outset, we found to be less than promising. There are currently 141 undergraduate students enrolled across the three grades at SAS.<sup>17</sup> Of the 86 students who were admitted into the first class of SAS in 2017 only 42 remain, a retention rate of 49%. The second year has fared a lot better. 104 students were accepted and 61 remain, a

<sup>16</sup> Vladimir Putin, “Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly.”

<sup>17</sup> This was the latest number as of July 22, 2020. The number of active students changes monthly at SAS since students drop out so frequently.

retention rate of 71%. The current freshman class had the lowest enrollment number at just 67 students.<sup>18</sup>

These numbers, however, are not disconcerting to Drs. Shcherbenok and Rusakova. SAS's aim, they explain, is not to graduate all the students it enrolls, but to graduate the best students. As Dr. Shcherbenok outlines in his Director's Address, a description of the institution that currently stands in place of a mission statement, SAS aims to "provide a unique, high-quality education for the best prepared, most talented, and most highly-motivated students from Russia and abroad."

If one views the high dropout rates from the perspective of a student-based learning model, as we did initially, it is only natural they would be interpreted as a mark of failure. But if one takes them, instead, as an indication that only the truly exceptional have made the cut, only those who meet the standards of excellence set by SAS, then you begin to see what motivates the administration to take such hardline policies.

"Most Russians go to university to have fun," Associate Director of SAS, Anastasia Rusakova, explained to our research team. "But we had to position ourselves as different from other Russian universities to create the cultural identity of SAS. Our first year, we tried to build a fence around the university. We wanted to give them a bubble." SAS resembles something more out of Silicon Valley than a Russian higher educational institution. The interior is minimalistic: all sleek, white walls, and big windows with pops of bright colors to accent the furniture. Study rooms are glass boxes with round tables and chairs clustered around; students know, as one professor quipped, that the eyes of the faculty are always on them. Like a Google campus, the building is designed to keep the students inside, working and collaborating as much as possible. Unlike most Russian universities, the school is open 24/7. In the words of Dr. Rusakova, "There is a reason our coffee shop is named 'Discipline' and our bookstore is named 'Nobody Sleeps.'"

Drs. Shcherbenok and Rusakova, it seems, do not have the luxury to think on the smaller scale of individual student journeys. They are building a brand, and the first class of SAS graduates (coming in 2021) will exit the institution as brand ambassadors, whether they intend to or not. It is therefore, from the perspective of the administration, extremely prudent to cultivate a reputation of excellence among those who do make it to the finish line, even if many students fail along the way. When a member of our research team suggested that this approach is, perhaps, precisely the opposite of the United States' famous "No Child Left Behind" policy, Dr. Shcherbenok responded, "Yes, precisely."

### **SAS: View From the Office**

The circumstances that allowed SAS to be founded in the first place, and continue to perpetuate its existence, are not altogether without their complications and drawbacks. In many ways the institution, like its director, exhibits a unique amalgamation of Western and Russian qualities. This applies not only to its vision and work culture, but also to its administrative logistics.

At SAS, there are only four official members of the administration, including Directors Shcherbenok and Rusakova. However, there are also several staff members who work in

<sup>18</sup> Statistics provided to our research team by SAS Education Officer Valeria Savina.



administrative affairs, and faculty are expected to carry out certain administrative tasks, particularly in regards to the Academic Committee. It became clear to our research team during our time on campus that the experience of administrating this institution is perceived quite differently by those whose daily work takes place on the ground at SAS and is perpetually embroiled in the paradoxes of being such a forward-thinking institution forced to adhere to Russian state regulations imposed by the Ministry of Science and Higher Education. The clearest example of this disconnect comes in the form of Dr. Daniel Kontowski, Ph.D.

Dr. Kontowski, a Polish expatriate, is the Head of Education at SAS. He is responsible for “leading and improving the work of Education Office and ensuring the smooth delivery of educational activities at both Bachelor’s and Master’s level,” and working “with the administration, faculty, students and staff at the further development of the SAS educational vision to ensure it is bold, feasible, and coherent with the larger strategy of the institution.” What this means practically is that Dr. Kontowski and a handful of staff members are often left to handle the question of how SAS is to function on a day-to-day basis. Given that SAS is a part of the University of Tyumen, a Russian state university beholden to state regulations, this process can often be paradoxical and perplexing.

Take, for example, the fact that there are strict regulations dictating the length and content of Russian syllabi at state universities, and the fact that the professors designing syllabi for SAS often do not speak Russian, let alone understand these regulations. It is Dr. Kontowski and his team who painstakingly translate, alter, and pad out the existing syllabi so that they are compliant with state regulations. An elective course, unlike in the West, cannot be transferred in the future to apply toward a major, which can present issues. For instance, if an Economics student has already taken an introductory course voluntarily his sophomore year, he may now have to take the same course again, simply under the correct designation, to have it count toward his degree. Or perhaps an international student seeks to take Russian, but, as it is not offered at SAS, must take classes at UTMN. It is Dr. Kontowski, again, who liaises with the student body, the faculty, and the administration to attempt to resolve these questions.

This work is unrelenting and vital to the institution’s success thus far; it is also incredibly taxing on those involved. Whereas our interviews with Drs. Shcherbenok and Rusakova were optimistic and forward-thinking, there was a different overarching sentiment to our interviews with Dr. Kontowski and the lower administration: containment and crisis management. It was rare during our visit to SAS to see Dr. Kontowski standing still. On one memorable afternoon while we conducted a group session with students in a glass breakout room, we witnessed Dr. Kontowski running back and forth along the hallway at least a dozen times in an hour, no doubt putting out an administrative fire that would take far more precious time to explain than he had to offer.

While there are many issues with SAS, which all parties will readily acknowledge as needing to be resolved before the project can progress, we believe this is an issue of particular concern. There is a clear and, arguably, growing gap between the high-level administration’s ambitions of branding, promotion, and big-picture scalability, compared with the demands on the student-oriented administration to keep the ship afloat. To ask a single administrator and his staff to handle the never-ending ad hoc issues associated with this project is unquestionably unsustainable, and it is not lost on the faculty or students of SAS how taxing this work is for Dr.

Kontowski and his team. One faculty member told us, “When Daniel arrived, it was love at first sight ... but now he’s burning the candle at both ends.”

### **III. THE STUDENTS: AMBITIONS, EXPECTATIONS, AND REALITY**

SAS currently has 141 undergraduate students enrolled across three grades.<sup>19</sup> They hail from all corners of Russia, and there is a handful of international students. Over 60% of the students are from the Tyumen region. Our research team conducted interviews, mostly group interviews, with 21 current students: five freshmen, eight sophomores, and eight juniors. The interviews were arranged for us by SAS Education Officer, Valeria Savina, who works on the internationalization of the school, undergraduate recruitment, and workflow problems. We asked the students about their experience at SAS, their impressions of the liberal arts model, and where they see room for improvement.

#### **What Kind of Student Is Attracted to SAS?**

The students we talked to usually found out about SAS in one of three ways: 1) social media advertising on Facebook or Instagram; 2) an SAS administrator or faculty member gave a presentation at their high school (select faculty members travel around Russia to spread the word about SAS, mostly in the Tyumen Oblast and neighboring Siberian regions); or 3) they were admitted to the University of Tyumen and were referred or recruited to SAS by UTMN staff.

The students who are drawn to SAS are naturally on the adventurous side. One freshman, for example, recounted finding out about SAS through his mother, who had seen an advertisement for the institute on Instagram. She thought the flexible learning system could be an advantage for her son, who did not know what career path he wanted to follow. She encouraged him to apply, and he replied, “Why not?”

Other students actively seek out SAS, though they tend to be the exception, since the new school is not widely known outside of Tyumen. A freshman, Sofya Kolusheva, began her undergraduate work in the Department of Asian and African Studies at the Saint Petersburg State University (SPBU), which is ranked as the second-best university in Russia by Quacquarelli Symonds. She decided to transfer to SAS for a couple of reasons. Among them, she wanted the freedom to study subjects outside of her specialty. So far, she is happy she transferred.

Many of the SAS students we talked to did not view their decision to partake in an educational experiment as a gamble. Lots of students are there on full scholarship, so the financial sink is not the concern that it would be at most American universities. There is also a sense among some young Russians that a Russian bachelor’s degree is useless. They go to university because their parents say they should, students explained to us. That was what you did in the Soviet Union, which had exceptional and highly respected public higher education. But today, not all students see the knowledge or degree they receive as a way to climb the socioeconomic ladder or improve their job prospects. “You don’t really need the knowledge that you get at most Russian universities in the modern Russian labor market and the gig economy,” explained Artyom Bologov, an SAS sophomore. “So, in coming to SAS, the stakes aren’t so high.”

<sup>19</sup> Enrollment number as of July 22, 2020. There are also 22 M.A. students.

## Student Opinions: The Good

In general, the students we talked to had positive assessments of SAS, though every single one was also vocal about the fact that SAS is a work in progress with many problems to iron out. Students were mostly struck by the novelty of the liberal arts model. Many of them were initially attracted to the institution because they did not know what they wanted to study. They liked the idea of being able to explore several subjects and to have a choice in what they studied.

Other aspects of the liberal model that students have enjoyed include the focus on critical thinking and learning how to express one's opinions. "In this bubble, you feel free, like you can do or say whatever you want," said freshman Ekaterina Drozdova. This sentiment, as well as the phrase "freedom of speech," came up repeatedly in our interviews with students. A first-year student, Tursunayim Badyshova added to Ms. Drozdova's comment that, while SAS may be a bubble within Tyumen, it can also be a portal to the world outside of Russia. "Here, we are connected to global issues and problems, and we're thinking about how to solve them." Sophomore Arina Uskova chimed in, "At SAS, I have the ability to talk with people from other places and grapple with ideas that I don't agree with."

Several students echoed this notion that SAS has broadened their outlook towards learning. Now, they view education as a lifelong pursuit of curiosity, rather than designated time in a classroom. Sophomore Leonid Kharlov described this notion: "SAS has become an essential part of my life." There were nods all around the room as the six other students in our group interview listened. "Before taking Great Books [one of SAS's core courses], I thought philosophy was boring," Mr. Kharlov continued, "Now I love it." Junior Elizaveta Krylova also talked about how liberal arts had enriched her life: "I continue thinking about these big ideas after I leave the classroom, and even when I'm on vacation."

But blending the boundaries between university and life is not without its drawbacks. Students were quick to add that burnout is part and parcel of attending SAS. Junior Alina Zalyaletdinova noted, "I'm always excited and exhausted all at the same time." For some, the stress is positive. Freshman Daria Kozhenikova noted: "The professors are so encouraging and motivating. They give us the strength to carry on. And the stress is positive, it helps you grow." Junior Vladislav Siyutkin said that even though the workload can be heavy, he feels like there's a lot of support from faculty. For others, the expectation to work without rest is exhausting. Its impact can be seen in the institute's low retention rates, which are listed in the previous section of this paper.

In addition to the character-building features of the SAS educational model, some students see practical benefits. Artyom Bologov, a second-year declared IT major, feels that his time at SAS will make him more competitive in the job market. "IT is an international field, so you need innovative thinkers," said Mr. Bologov. "IT companies will value the multi-disciplinary education I've gotten here." Mr. Bologov also liked that his courses asked him to think critically about the ethical questions in the world of tech, something that will influence how he approaches his work.

Anastasia Dier, a third-year economics major, also said that her SAS education would give her a competitive edge in the job market. Traditional economics training in Russian universities doesn't focus on team-based collaboration, she explained, but SAS does. In the business and finance world, where most jobs require working on a team, Ms. Dier sees the collaboration skills she's honed at SAS as a huge boon.

### **Student Opinions: The Bad**

But the school's model is not working for everyone, even within a given specialization. Roman Starikov, a third-year IT major, said that his education at SAS will not be helpful for finding a job in IT. He even said that if he can find a programming job at the end of the year, he will not complete his bachelor's degree at SAS. "SAS is a great experiment, but I think choosing the major in the third year is too late for IT," said Mr. Starikov. In his view, the STEM programs are underdeveloped.

This opinion was echoed by third-year student Olga Korenovskaya, who is a biology major. Students need a full four years to study biology, she said, not just the two years of focused study that happens at SAS after students pick their majors. SAS biology majors currently spend eight weeks studying the human body, for example, whereas in most Russian universities, biology majors spend a year or more on the topic. Additionally, the SAS building does not have laboratories. Students have to use the UTMN facilities, but they often find it hard to gain access, due to lack of communication between UTMN and SAS professors, and because the SAS students are sometimes viewed as separate from UTMN. This means that most of Ms. Korenovskaya's classes on biology are lectures on theory with minimal hands-on training. "In Russia, this education in biology is not very applicable," Ms. Korenovskaya said. She would have to earn a Master's degree in order to find a job, whereas students at most Russian universities who majored in biology do not have to seek out additional education.

Mr. Starikov said the same thing about IT: Most students would have to get a master's degree after completing SAS. Earning a postgraduate degree is indeed one of Dr. Shcherbenok's goals for SAS students, but students like Mr. Starikov and Ms. Korenovskaya find this to be out of touch with the realities and practicalities of job hunting in Russia. It should be noted, however, that the administration is aware of the weakness of the IT program. SAS staff is currently in talks with the Higher IT School at Tomsk State University in Tomsk, Russia, about how to upgrade the SAS program.

Mr. Kharlov, who is also an IT major at SAS, felt torn between truly enjoying his liberal arts experience and worrying about the practicality of his education within Russia. Most people don't know what liberal arts is, he said, and once the concept is explained to them, they are rarely impressed by it. The question he gets from family and friends at home is, what will he do with this strange education? "It's depressing in some ways; even if I'm in a liberal arts institution the overall system in this country is the same. I'd rather take some more practical classes to make my education safer." Another student summed up the dilemma of liberal arts and job hunting succinctly: "I feel like I know a lot and nothing at the same time."

### **A Looming Problem: The English Language Requirement**

Over and over during interviews, we heard students critique the English language predicament at SAS. Some were upset because students are not divided into classes by their language level. Since most classes at SAS are discussion-based, this can greatly impact the quality of the lessons. Other students are frustrated because they feel they do not have enough support to catch up to their peers who have higher English proficiency.

The administration has taken some steps to try to fix this problem. Freshmen take English their first semester, and afterward English as a Second Language is offered as an elective for those who need extra help. However, even with all these built-in language classes, the program can be a hard adjustment for freshmen, who still have to take all of their other courses in English, starting from the third quarter. Being pushed to do college-level work in one's second language creates a sink or swim situation for many students.

### **Why Is the English Level So Low?**

Because high school students applying to SAS know the curriculum will be in English, most of the students who apply are self-selecting. However, SAS has no English language entrance exam. This is because SAS is still part of UTMN, and therefore, the institution must admit students based on the same criteria as any state university. Students are admitted on the basis of three standardized test scores in three subjects of the student's choice. This national test is called the Unified State Exam (EGE in Russian). Under Russian law, SAS cannot ask students for additional application materials such as interviews, essays, or even English language tests. This means that if a student does not submit an English EGE score, the admissions committee has no way of knowing the student's language level.

While most students do not apply unless they have the confidence to work in English, not all incoming students were fully aware of the challenge they were to face. For example, former SAS student Lera (she declined to give her last name) was a member of the first class admitted to SAS in 2017. She dropped out after her first semester but re-enrolled in 2018 to repeat her freshman year. She breezed through the first semester and then struggled when she reached the second semester, confronting classes she had not already taken.

Lera was drawn to SAS for its experimental approach to learning and the fact that students do not have to declare a major before admission. She described her first quarter as a dream. "Everything was new and exciting," she said. The problem came with her English proficiency. According to Lera, she asked her professors and administrators about how she could work on her English. They suggested she go to the institute's writing center for tutoring. Lera claims she did this diligently, but she could not figure out how to improve her essays. "I could never get a clear explanation from my professors or the writing tutors of what was wrong. If there was a chance to have more hands-on tutoring for English language, it would have been helpful." But, as established before, SAS does not model itself on the "No Child Left Behind" policy.

At least once a semester, students have to pass an ESL test. The latest English language policy, laid out in the 2019-2020 school year, stated that, by the end of the academic year, every student would have to test at a B1 (intermediate) English level, based on the Common European

Framework of Reference. Sophomores and juniors are also expected to score at least a 7.0 out of 9.0 on the IELTS English Language Test in December 2020. In April 2020, the administration adjusted their expectations, due to the setback of coronavirus-imposed remote learning. They will not be as strict this year about reaching their goal, but students who scored a 6.0 on the IELTS are not allowed to continue to the next grade unless they improve. In short, SAS's standards for English proficiency remain in flux.

The October 2019-2020 system was not in place when Lera was at SAS, but her low English level made it impossible to pass her classes. Lera felt that in 2017 when SAS needed to find enough students to build a freshman class, administrators did not accurately describe how little support there would be (in her opinion) for English-language learning.

The administration hopes that in the future, the school will have built up enough of a national reputation that the admissions process will be self-selecting: only students with advanced English language skills will apply. The administration also hopes to spend less money on ESL classes, since they have proved difficult to organize, and sometimes students with fluent English take the ESL elective to get an easy A. Most importantly, the ESL classes redirect resources and funding away from the school's main courses, the interdisciplinary ones that SAS was created to provide.

#### **IV. THE FACULTY: STRUCTURE, CHALLENGES, VISIONS FOR SUCCESS**

In our interviews, our team was curious to ascertain the extent to which tension existed or expectations differed between the international and Russian members of faculty. In reality, we observed relatively little on this score, and instead took note on many occasions of a dynamic wherein the students and faculty are aligned, with the tension being not between them, but mutually with the administration.

Perhaps the largest misalignment we observed is the faculty's adamancy that above all, if SAS is to be an institution of higher learning, its methods, pedagogical or otherwise, must place the students front and center. A student-based approach, according to the faculty, is anathema to much of what the administration has done in the past three years, including its handling of the English language requirement.

There are areas, however, where all parties seem to be aligned: everyone agrees, be they faculty or administration, that the goal of SAS is to produce students who are able to effectively enter the world with core competencies which they can apply to a myriad of potential futures, given that we live in an increasingly uncertain world. Where the faculty and the administration seem to differ is the priorities and methods for achieving those goals.

#### **Structuring Principles: Research, Teaching, and Hierarchy**

The School of Advanced Studies has priorities and targets on every level, and perhaps one of the more challenging and nuanced aspects of its continued functioning and future success is its faculty. SAS employs 64 faculty members of varying nationalities and specialization backgrounds ranging from art history and political theory to biology and media studies. 30 of these faculty members work at SAS on a permanent basis, while the remaining 34 are visiting

professors.<sup>20</sup> According to SAS, “most contracts are 45% research, 45% teaching and 10% administrative.” Both permanent and visiting faculty teach a combination of core, major, and elective courses during the academic year and are expected to contribute to their assigned research team.

In keeping with SAS’s overall vision for its multidisciplinary pedagogical structure for its students, faculty at the institution are also expected to operate within this more experimental framework. In functional terms, what this means is that faculty at SAS are hired and work in an interdisciplinary research capacity. Each individual faculty member may apply or be recruited because of an individual specialty or research focus, but the intention is to combine those individual focuses into a larger whole which, ideally, disrupts the traditional understanding of research groups as being limited to a single or closely related fields. For example, a faculty research group at SAS could include a biologist, an anthropologist, and an economist whose research concerns the shift in Russia from reliance on natural resources to the development of human capital and implications of this shift in each of their given spheres of expertise. In its promotional materials and hiring statements, SAS Director Andrey Shcherbenok articulates why he feels this is the best approach:

“The outside world is interested in more general questions which don’t have any specific disciplinary dimension. They are multidisciplinary questions, which are the questions which concern humanity. It concerns business education, it concerns people who develop technology. So, one answer to that is multidisciplinary team research: to get a team of people from different disciplines who work together to produce research results which are relevant for several disciplines and, by extension, to the larger world. The question is how to get this team together. And we’ve developed a format at the School of Advanced Studies which is called Project Design Sessions to do exactly that.”

SAS’s Project Design Sessions are a primary factor in the institution’s hiring practices. When SAS conducts faculty hiring for the upcoming academic year, the process is overseen by an international search committee with representatives from both Russian and Western institutions. Short-listed candidates have the opportunity to team up “through virtual contact in order to formulate draft multidisciplinary team projects.” In the spring of the academic year preceding their potential hiring, these candidates present and participate in the Project Design Session at SAS, and core members of the most promising project teams are offered full-time faculty positions.

An employed SAS faculty member, visiting or otherwise, is obligated upon commencement of his or her duties to conduct research within their given team, as well as teach coursework throughout the academic year. SAS functions on the quarter system, and in the past, SAS faculty were given the option to take a quarter off from teaching in order to focus on research. Now, almost new contracts do not include this option. This revised policy is an attempt to maintain a vibrant academic community throughout the year by keeping teachers present in the classroom. As a result, professors are expected to teach and conduct research at the same. Since SAS is part of the University of Tyumen, the school must adhere to a certain number of contact hours for

<sup>20</sup> These are the faculty numbers as of July 22, 2020. As with the students, the number of faculty is often in flux.

professors, in compliance with Russian educational standards for a state university. At SAS, this means the maximum required teaching load is 256 academic hours a year, though this is fewer than the number of hours most UTMN professors are required to teach. This, if divided over the academic calendar provided by SAS, averages to approximately 8 academic hours per week (four quarters) or 10 hours per week (three quarters teaching, one quarter research). This is a significantly higher workload than the equivalent contact hours in, for example, many liberal arts institutions in the United States, where professors are typically not expected to spend more than 3-4 academic hours actively teaching per week.

Another unorthodox aspect of SAS's faculty policy is its lack of hierarchy. The official term being "open rank," the faculty of SAS have no explicit authority insofar as they relate to one another. The age and experience within the faculty is immensely broad, ranging from those having just completed their PhDs to leading experts in their given field with decades of teaching and administrative experience as senior faculty, lecturers, or deans.

### **Challenges: Hiring, Retention, Satisfaction**

The faculty of SAS is as diverse in its opinions on the institution as it is by any other metric. During the field research our team conducted in Tyumen in February 2020, we were able to speak to many professors directly, visiting and permanent faculty, and interview them at length about their perspectives on their work at SAS, the institution itself, and its capacity for success. There are of course challenges which face any fledgling institution, and the SAS faculty were open to discussing those challenges, which they consider to be most crucial. What follows are the key takeaways we gleaned from our direct interviews with faculty.

#### *Expectation Vs. Reality*

A key point of issue for SAS faculty was the clear disparity between how the position was presented to them during the hiring process and what the demands of the job ended up being in a practical sense. SAS certainly makes a striking first impression: it is clean, bright, modern, and filled with enthusiastic people all of whom would certainly be on their best behavior when potential faculty are making the rounds. However, one faculty member told us that a colleague, upon arriving to commence their position, was told that not only would they not in fact be teaching the course they had been preparing to teach since the offer was extended, but would be expected to teach an entirely different course instead, with a week to design the syllabus.

Other administrative problems were voiced as well. First, we were informed that the sheer number of teaching hours required are not always as explicitly emphasized as they should be, especially given how different this expectation is from many Western liberal arts institutions. We overwhelmingly heard this critique, predictably most often from the international faculty rather than Russian faculty members, who presumably are more aligned with the expectations on this particular score.

Moreover, the lack of faculty hierarchy ("open rank"), which is such a key component of the PR recruitment strategies of SAS, seems as though it may be causing more friction among the faculty than may have been expected by the administration. Multiple faculty members spoke at



length about the frustrations of weekly faculty meetings, which can last as long as four hours, with no minutes being taken, no discussion leaders, and no system of organization by which to defer to those with more experience.

Another point of tension are the research groups themselves. As promising as multidisciplinary research may sound and as much as the administration and the faculty are aligned in principle on this concept, principle and practice once again come into conflict. As we heard from many faculty members, it can often prove exceptionally difficult to find a common vocabulary among and across various fields in order to tackle a problem in a coherent way. While finding that common vocabulary is, of course, part of the challenge, it is proving to be far more challenging than many anticipated and is stagnating research efforts, in addition to lowering group unity and morale.

Additionally, the implementation of the English language requirement has caused many issues for faculty, as well as for students. In a conversation with a member of our research team, one faculty member conveyed the problem quite succinctly: “Can you imagine an effective way to teach a high-level seminar to a group of ESL students whose abilities in English range from A1 to B2? The answer is, it’s impossible. When the ability level is that far-ranging, you can’t target anyone effectively, let alone teach in a way which will be effective for a group.”

Outside of these practical challenges, SAS faculty also levied criticism about the implementation of the English language requirement in broader terms. There was a pervasive sentiment among our faculty interviewees that the administration did not offer the students sufficient support during this transition, and therefore are far more culpable for the high dropout rates at SAS than they would care to admit. This manifested even in how the transition came about. Rather than scaling the workload to accommodate a more realistic shift into an English-only curriculum, the administration made an abrupt, top-down declaration which left faculty and students reeling from one module to the next, expected to generate the same amount and quality of content exclusively in English as they had been before the policy came into place. Many faculty members are of the opinion that given proper transition time and support, more students could have made the shift successfully, but even those students who were motivated and trying very hard to catch up simply did not have the resources or administrative support to make the cut. In the words of one faculty member, “It’s like dropping someone into a warzone with a dull knife and an empty AK-47. It’s mission impossible.”

Faculty also noted that certain structural changes which could have supported students were not implemented by the administration when they could have been. For example, a very popular former professor at SAS (referenced multiple times by students and faculty alike) came to the institution with his wife, who was also promised work and had the qualifications to head up a more developed ESL department. Due to a combination of factors, the administration did not develop or extend such an opportunity, and the professor ended up accepting an offer from another institution. It is the opinion of many on the faculty that had the administration been more proactive, they would have retained this beloved teacher, as well as have provided the student body with direct English support, which would have had cascade effects on overall academic performance.

This single case aside, however, retention remains a broader issue for the faculty of SAS. There is very high turnover, due no doubt in part to some of the issues raised above, but also due to the inherent locale. Tyumen is a city with much to offer, but if a potential hire has a family or is not fluent in Russian, it can be very difficult for that person to cultivate a sustainable, enjoyable lifestyle outside of SAS. Educational opportunities are extremely limited for children of non-Russian speakers, and the level of English fluency in Tyumen is significantly lower on the whole than in cities such as Moscow or St. Petersburg, with minimal English language community activities on offer. This of course makes it very difficult to forge inroads with the local community in a way which creates meaning outside of the job itself, something which any faculty member would agree is key to a prolonged job relocation.

SAS is thus currently facing a bit of a paradox: it seeks to hire and retain a diverse range of faculty, deliberately seeking out those who have skills and expertise outside of the sphere of Russian affairs. Nevertheless, faculty members that have been retained the longest at SAS, predictably tend to be those with previous experience in Russia, ability in the Russian language, and a willingness to engage with the community. In the words of one faculty member, “But you can’t clone [us]. You need to cultivate an environment which creates [us]. And the administration isn’t doing that.”

## V. CONCLUSION

It was the combination of SKOLKOVO’s innovative drive and resources, Dr. Shcherbenok’s particular expertise, support from the University of Tyumen, and available government funding that allowed SAS to explode so declaratively into existence. But how does Dr. Shcherbenok plan to maintain momentum and grow the project further? For one thing, he is very results-oriented in his framing of SAS. During our interviews and in subsequent conversations with staff, we observed repeatedly that the organizing logic and vocabulary of success among the administration is far more analogous to a startup than to an educational institution. While these ideas are not inherently mutually exclusive, they can come into conflict in the particulars. Rather than measuring success by the number of minds broadened or theses well-defended, Dr. Shcherbenok and the administration take a more hard-nosed, numbers-based approach. Instead, they focus on how many students have met the objective standards of excellence set in terms of English proficiency, how many conferences their research teams been accepted to, and how many views their most recent video campaign has on social media. The experiment’s greatest test will come when the first class of students graduates in 2021. Then, Dr. Shcherbenok will acquire some of the most important data points to date, most notable: the number of students admitted to top-ranked Master’s degree programs abroad and number employed in career-advancing jobs.

This is the perspective of the man and administration responsible for the longevity and scalability of this project. If SAS is to be successful at disrupting the Russian educational landscape, then it needs to be the first of many greenfield campuses at established universities across the country. For this to happen, this flagship campus must not fail. Its example must be able to convince other universities to take a similar risk at their own institutions. For now, it is too early to tell what the impact of SAS will be and whether that impact will be positive or negative. That assessment can

only come, at a minimum, in the next five years, after the first classes have matriculated and once there is data to show how students are using their education.

From a non-data driven perspective, SAS has already had success. Our interviews with students revealed a powerful, positive impression that SAS's liberal arts model has left on them. Many of the students felt that their classes had opened new possibilities, both career-wise and intellectually. As one sophomore, Ekaterina Drozdova, explained to us, "I never knew what it was like to love learning before I came to SAS." Many students also expressed a desire to apply their liberal arts education to improving their local communities. "I am actually more optimistic about my future after attending SAS," said junior Alina Zalyaletdinova, "I want to make something out of what I've learned here and help others." Even Lera, the student who left SAS, said she gained critical thinking skills at SAS. "I started to really think about and form my own opinions at SAS," she told us. An argument could certainly be made that Dr. Shcherbenok's approach, while perhaps not as "student-focused" in the short term, will allow SAS to grow in such a way that future iterations of the same idea are possible for a greater number of students. Change, after all, comes at a cost.

Ultimately, SAS's long-term success and scalability will depend in part on continued support from the Ministry of Science and Higher Education. So far, the educational policy coming from Moscow looks promising, as Dr. Falkov heads the Ministry. Already, the federal government has taken steps to support progressive notions like internationalization and changing one's major. On February 6, 2020, President Putin signed a law that would allow international students to work without obtaining a permit while studying in Russia. This is expected to help reduce dropout rates among international students who cannot afford living expenses.<sup>21</sup> But only time will tell if the advancing of progressive education in Russia has, as Dr. Shcherbenok characterizes it, "an unstoppable momentum."

### **Looking Ahead: How Has Covid-19 Affected SAS?**

The field research conducted for this paper took place in February 2020. In follow-up remote interviews held in June 2020, we asked students, faculty, and administrators about the impact of Covid-19 on SAS and its long-term goals. While still in the early days of the coronavirus pandemic, the following section describes how SAS has pivoted to online learning and staff members' worries for the fall semester.

The faculty's main concern regards the pandemic's potential effect on hiring foreign faculty members. One visiting faculty member, whose contract finishes this August, told us: "Given how uncertain the situation will be with the border, I can't imagine that SAS won't have problems hiring and retaining foreign professors, even if they're able to open up the building in the fall for face-to-face teaching." However, other faculty members pointed out a possible positive effect. The pandemic has delivered a harsh blow to the already competitive academic job market, particularly in the United States. So, freshly-minted doctoral graduates might be more amenable

<sup>21</sup> Federal Law of February 6, 2020, No. 16-FZ "on amendments to the Federal Law on the legal status of foreign citizens in the Russian Federation." Official State System of Legal Information, February 6, 2020, <http://publication.pravo.gov.ru/Document/View/0001202002060026>.

to leaving their country to work in Tyumen, provided they are able to enter Russia in the first place.

With regards to student admission, the state exams that students have to take in order to enter college have been pushed back until July, which means universities will be admitting students very late in August. Administrators therefore have no idea how the pandemic will affect admission rates. If far fewer students apply to SAS this year, then this could become a problem for building up the school's reputation inside of Russia and for recruiting the kind of high-achieving, advanced English-speaking students that the school needs to attract.

While current SAS students expressed that they sometimes struggle with motivation in online classes and miss the in-person experience, the transition to online learning has brought out some positive changes. Dr. Kontowski said that because all schedules, courses, and events are currently online, SAS "is now much more transparent, internally and externally." For example, SAS hosts a course that is open to the public each semester, and this semester's course is now available to a larger audience than ever before; after all, anyone in the world can tune in to the Zoom conference. This semester's open course is taught by anthropologist Jay Silverstein, Ph.D. and is titled "The Rise and Fall of Complex Societies", an apt coincidence.

Quarantine has also pushed SAS administrators to focus on publicizing the university more outside of Tyumen, and even outside of Russia. They have made several courses available on Zoom, in addition to the one above, and are actively vlogging, blogging, and posting on Instagram. Online teaching has also introduced a system that gives faculty weekly grading sheets, which provide professors with early warning data if a student is falling behind.

SAS students and faculty were likely more prepared for the pandemic's unpredictable nature than more traditional institutions in Russia or abroad, given the inherently experimental nature of the school. One faculty member said that his students are taking the opportunity to learn more about the potential for online learning, experimenting with Discord, Trello, and improving online presentation formats. "I think this online format is showing us what the SAS graduate is going to be: people who have the ability to pivot and adjust to whatever changes, good or bad, might come." In the captain's chair, Dr. Shcherbenok remains unphased. "SAS is a plane that's still in the process of taking off," he told us. "If we put it on autopilot, it will just fall." Pandemic or no pandemic, it seems that the School of Advanced Studies continues to have its sights set onward and upward.