

Teaching Humanities at the Joint HSE/NES BA Program in Economics

Oleg Voskoboynikov

*PhD, Associate professor at HSE School of History
HSE tenured professor
National Research University Higher School
of Economics
Russian Federation*

National Research University — Higher School of Economics (HSE) and New Economic School (NES) in Moscow have developed a joint BA program in economics, which differs from other programs in economics at Russia's leading universities in several ways: first of all, this one is highly competitive, and secondly, those lucky enough to have made it through the selection process enjoy a relatively free curriculum. Nowadays many universities offer their students a range of elective courses or an opportunity to take classes taught at other departments (the experience of Moscow State University is particularly interesting in this respect). And yet, contemporary Russian higher education model, which follows in the footsteps of the Soviet model, is built in such a way that high school students are basically expected to choose their future profession (or at least a broad specialization, such as economics, law, history) at the age of 16-17 already. A person that has been admitted to a regular economics department cannot really change their educational trajectory anymore. The Bologna Process has enabled young people to extend their adolescence by giving them an opportunity to make choices. On the whole, Russia is struggling to implement the Bologna Process, though HSE has been pretty successful on this path, and the joint HSE/NES program is yet another interesting experiment.

When prospective HSE/NES students open the program's curriculum, they might be surprised that economics is not its central part. The importance of English, logic or math is, of course, beyond doubt but what about art history, linguistics, cosmology or history of theater? Graduates of European and American universities with a long history understand that any profession marginally involving discourse or the art of rhetoric has its roots in humanities, therefore it is no surprise that future lawyers studying at Oxford spend their first two years reading classical poetry in order to master Latin. This is not perceived to be snobbish, and no one would deny lawyers, economists, mathematicians or doctors their right to study classics. In Russia, however, the situation is different.

HSE, a bold experimenter, is trying to integrate different subjects into the curricula of different specializations, thus students get a chance to learn something else beyond their

main field of study. In this respect, the joint HSE/NES program is not directly innovative.

In order to understand why economics undergrads need art history at all, let's try to imagine what they are like. HSE/NES students are rather special: they have all studied a lot and fought hard to enter the program; they aren't just smart and sharp but self-confident too (in a good way, i.e., not arrogant). I have been teaching art history at this program for four years now, and these are the kind of students I encounter every year. They are very talented and they seem to be even more motivated than the no less talented students from other programs. One year I got to teach a class of 46 at the same time, which was challenging: the front rows were occupied by the really motivated students, who were always more than active during class, while the back rows were occupied by those who had chosen my course because they had thought (quite mistakenly) that it would be an easy one. The program's first class graduated in 2015, and nearly a dozen graduates — including some of my former students — were directly admitted to PhD programs at top US schools, such as Columbia and Princeton. This is a very rewarding result for the program.

Yet, why do these students choose subjects like the one I teach? I believe there might be several reasons: 1) they like the contrast with their core subjects — such as mathematical analysis; 2) art history is by definition something beautiful since it is accompanied by slides showing masterpieces; 3) some students are genuinely interested in art and would like to get a deeper knowledge of the subject; 4) others, especially those with a mathematical mindset (which probably constitute a majority at the HSE/NES program), love science per se and enjoy every challenge. The intention behind combining a wide range of courses within one program is to allow young people to take a shot at various things. The original idea comes, probably, from Ancient Greece, but HSE and NES have been rather successful at implementing it in contemporary Russia, thus bringing to life the long-standing tradition of *enkyklios paideia* this 'encyclopaedic education', born in Aristotle's Athens.

I am rather sceptical about the dominance of economics in the modern system of values, but the HSE/NES experiment shows that when the country's best talents are drawn to such a program, it is beneficial for my discipline too. The papers and presentations prepared by HSE/NES students are in no way lower in quality than those prepared by the students majoring in history. However, HSE/NES students are much more demanding in terms of the clarity of the evaluation criteria used by the teacher, which helps me improving my course.

Surely enough, arguments break out during class from time to time because discussing a painting is different from solving an equation, and therefore, the opinions I voice might be less objective than those of my colleagues in other disciplines. Some students even start arguing or get emotional about a mere 3% of their final grade, which rarely happens

with history majors. Nevertheless, I do understand that the former have every right to worry about each and every percent they get because that might later become the crucial factor that would decide whether they are admitted to Harvard or other prestigious university or not. This is just a downside of the ultimately healthy quest for top education, leadership and success. Does it mean, though, that liberal arts, which are quite specific, could be transformed into something different, definite and clear-cut, with some simple evaluation criteria? Would, for example, asking the students to name ten 17th-century Flemish artists in 30 seconds be a valid test? Perhaps. Yet the idea is to teach them to distinguish between etching and lithography, between painting and drawing, between blue-black and coal-black, and to be able to discuss art in a well-reasoned and coherent way. This is not an equation at all.

In any case, I hope that HSE and NES continue trying to bring up if not the Renaissance-style uomo universale but at least a broad-minded future elite that is capable of tolerating alternative opinions and points of view.

.....

Who Takes HSE Courses on Coursera? The Differences between Economics, Humanities and Math-Intensive Courses

Ivan Gruzdev

Director at the Institutional Research Office

igrudev@hse.ru

Kirill Makarov

Research Assistant at the Institutional Research Office

makarov.vk@gmail.com

Tatiana Semenova

Analyst at the Institute of Education

tsemenova@hse.ru

Evgeniy Terentev

Analyst at the Institutional Research Office

eterentev@hse.ru

*National Research University
Higher School of Economics
Russian Federation*

The rapid expansion of massive online open courses (MOOCs) has raised a number of questions about this new phenomenon. One of them is: what is MOOCs audience like? While there are some studies on who uses MOOCs, there is very little discussion whether the participants of MOOCs are a homogeneous body or rather a highly differentiated group. According to the classics B. Clark and T. Becher, higher education system includes a set of worlds defined by institutional and disciplinary differences. Since MOOCs participants don't necessarily belong to any institution, an institutional ground for differentiation doesn't seem to be relevant. But a disciplinary one might still be in place. Then one of the reasons to think that there are "small worlds" within the world of MOOCs users is the extreme disciplinary diversity of online courses available. Institutional research office at Higher School of Economics (HSE) has carried out a range of online surveys involving the students enrolled at HSE Coursera courses, and has compared the participants of the courses on economics, social sciences & humanities, and on math & data analysis.

We have collected data about the audience of 17 courses that took place in 2014–2015. A questionnaire was sent to each person who had signed up for any of these courses. We have received 43,151 responses. All the courses were divided into three groups: 1) economics, 2) social sciences/humanities, and 3) math-intensive courses. The first group (N=16,548, 38% of the sample) included: Institutional Economics, Financial Markets and Institutions, Industrial Organization, Microeconomics Principles, Fundamentals of Corporate Finance, Microeconomics and Public Economics. Comparative Politics, History and Theory of Media, Economics for Non-economists, Philosophy of Culture, History of Economic Thought, and Understanding Russians were matched to the second group (N=14,594, 34% of the sample). "Math-intensive" courses (N=12,009, 28% of the sample) are represented by Linear Algebra, Game Theory, Econometrics, and Core Concepts in Data analysis. We compared the audiences of these three groups with regard to their socio-demographic and educational background, and their motivation to participate in the course.

According to our data, male and female MOOCs participants tend to have different preferences. Not unexpectedly, math courses have a much larger share of males than females, while the social sciences/humanities group is more female. With 57% of male audience, economics is closer to math. Thus, the patterns of subject choice on Coursera in terms of gender differentials seem to be pretty similar to those observed at traditional higher education institutions where humanities normally attract more girls and math-intensive majors get more boys.