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MOBILITY MEAN IN THE 21ST
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WHAT DOES ACADEMIC MOBILITY MEAN IN THE 21ST CENTURY? INTERNATIONAL EXPERIENCE OF YOUNG RUSSIAN SCHOLARS AND THE IDEA OF UNIVERSITY³

The paper investigates interviews from the archive of Poletayev Institute for Theoretical and Historical Studies in the Humanities (IGITI) which were conducted in 2010s with Russian scholars and professors. The data from these interviews is used to study transnational academic mobility experience in the post-Soviet years (2000s–2010s) by young Russian scholars – the respondents of the interviews who entered higher education institutions in the post-Soviet period. The paper examines how they described academic mobility experience, its impact on their idea of university, concept of excellence, and the significance of academic mobility itself.

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Key words: academic mobility, ‘brain drain’, international academia, young Russian scholars, academic excellence.

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Introduction

As it was noticed in Fred Dervin's Introduction to the 'Analysing the Consequences of Academic Mobility and Migration' (Dervin (ed.) 2011), the question upon this phenomenon was extremely relevant already in the middle of the 20th century. More than 50 years later, we still consider academic mobility and migration to be 'the motto of nearly every institution of higher education' (Dervin 2011: 1; Teichler 2015). Nowadays, it is transnational⁴, common and routine for the academic world. From the point of view of modern sociologists and policy makers academic mobility (or intellectual migration) is a vital feature of contemporary academia and the core element of the agenda of every university that enters (or has an inclination to enter) the international academic world at the largest scale possible (Teichler 2015; Bhandari & Blumenthal 2011; Subbotin et al. 2020 and others⁵).

In this article, we are going to pay attention not primarily to the process of mobility itself, but, following the cited edition, the influence of (trans)international academic mobility on young Russian scholars in the post-soviet period and its impact on their way of thinking about higher education institutions. We will try to establish the connections between academic mobility experience and the vision of contemporary academia reckoned by young Russian scholars who became part of newly created university 'corporations' – such as the National Research University Higher School of Economics (further indicated as HSE). Our choice for this particular institution was driven by the logic of historical changes in post-soviet Russia and the abundance of literature on the history and conceptual development of that university (Froumin 2011; Froumin & Remorenko 2020).

After 1991 ex-soviet countries entered a stage of independent development which included establishing national systems of higher education institutions intertwined with the global universities system. Alongside previously existing universities, with a background in imperial Russia and Soviet higher education projects (e.g. instiutalization of vocational schools as higher education institutions [Smolentseva 2016: 171]), new institutions were created, both private and state-sponsored. HSE was one of those innovative projects designed for postgraduate education in economics and law – to provide non-soviet training in these disciplines to create a cohort of specialists helpful for instiutalization of new principles of non-Soviet existence (Froumine 2011; Sogomonov 2006).

We are going to elaborate on the following research questions:

- How do young scholars perceive their experience of academic mobility?

⁴ 'Transnational' means that the mobility is performed across national boundaries and 'above' them – but without any required 'official interaction between nations' (Kim 2009; Teichler 2015). The process of transnationalization of higher education has the same meaning, thus, related to the academic mobility system.

⁵ This idea is explicitly stated in every academic paper (and even journalist pieces) that touches the topic of academic mobility.

- What vocabulary do they use to describe it (the earnestness of the terminology might reflect on the impact academic mobility had on their career and their reception of knowledge about the functioning of academia/university they gained during academic mobility)?
- Does such experience shape the attitude towards the idea of university, its elements and features, and if yes – to what extent?

Our interest in this particular case arises from studying an interview collection of Russian scholars and professors from various parts of post-soviet Russia. The collection was composed by students and researchers (under the guidance of Professor Elena A. Vishlenkova) for the project on the oral history of Russian post-soviet universities. The collection of oral testimonies of Russian university professors, lecturers, and researchers is archived in a database at the Institute for Theoretical and Historical Studies in the Humanities, a research department at the Faculty of Humanities, National Research University Higher School of Economics (Moscow, Russia)⁶. Scholars of various humanities disciplines and scientists became the respondents for this interview collection. Their gender, age, and place of residence differentiate as well. Some of the interviewees at the moment of the project conduction were holding high administrative positions in Russian universities and/or scientific institutions (research centers and, for example, the Academy of Sciences), in Moscow and regional ones. Thus, at some point, we are dealing with the respondents that represent a specific elite group both within the academic community⁷ and modern Russian society (as scholars and scientists might be considered an elitist or status group – inherited from the Soviet period social phenomenon).

According to the initial goals of this university oral history project, the major part of the interviews was conducted with those members of the Russian academic community who had started their scientific career in the Soviet Union. They could, thus, make comparisons of the three stages of the late 20th-century university development (last Soviet decades, the 1990s, and the beginning of the 21st century). Although, at some point, the collection was replenished with the interviews with younger scholars – those who either had no connections to the Soviet university model and entered a higher education institution after the Soviet Union collapse or those who started right before that event. Hence, when we refer to the respondents as ‘young scholars’⁸, we use ‘young’ as a nominal descriptive word to distinguish them from those scholars who worked in Soviet universities. We

⁶ The interviews with the respondents’ consent to publish may be found on the project’s webpage: <https://igiti.hse.ru/unimemory/interview>. All the rest is stored (although still a bit scattered) on devices of IGITI employees.

⁷ For the history of the term usage in Russia, see Yudin, Greg. 2010. Illuziya nauchnogo soobshchestva. *Sotsiologicheskoye Obozreniye* (9:3): 57–84. (<https://sociologica.hse.ru/2010-9-3/27370332.html>)

⁸ We use the word ‘scholar’ as all the respondents whose interviews we chose for this paper are specialists in different fields of humanities – social sciences, history, philosophy, philology, and/or conduct multidisciplinary research in those fields.

decided to focus on the contemporary academic community and contemporary idea of university carried out by young scholars: what features should the idea of university possess, in their view?

We will not enforce answers to those questions if the respondents do not opine on them in their interviews. These interviews themselves do not always contain the questions on the university's idea – the questionnaire varies over the years according to the slight shifts in the project's research goals mentioned above. That is why in some interviews the questions about the idea of university are explicitly posed – in order to establish the history of the relatively recently founded HSE. In some others – the narrative about learning/teaching experience, comparisons between HSE and other higher education institutions, and, the most important for our research, the narrative about academic mobility participation are presented.

In our research, we are going to refer only to the (trans)international mobility experience of the respondents. For the factual data, we have created a table, which is presented in the appendix. We have selected 15 interviews out of 180 from the IGITI archive. Fourteen of them are published on the IGITI project website on the oral history of universities – that is why we will refer to the respondents' answers using their full names and credentials. As there is one interview that is not published (the interviewee did not give his consent) and is designed to be used only for research purposes and not to be read by the broad public, we will not use the respondent's name but initials when quoting the interview.

Although all the selected interviewees represent the specific group of scholars we are interested in for our research, not all of them fulfill our project's goals. Nevertheless, they still contain some piece of information that might shed light on our research questions. The criteria for choosing the interviews were the following:

– approximate age of entering the university (as an undergraduate student; as a teaching assistant; lecturer/researcher – varies according to the information available in open Internet/media sources and/or given by the informants)⁹,

⁹ We tried to choose those respondents whose age at the moment of the interview was under 40 years old. Although the description 'young' might be considered as a 'floating', unfixed and imprecise definition. The definition of 'young' also varied in policies of governmental structures, research foundations, and scientific institutions that were occupied with providing financial support for such scholars (sponsoring their domestic research or academic mobility, proving grants and stipends). The major part of non-governmental science supporting funds require their applicants to be no older than 27/30 years (see, for example, those webpages [in Russian]: <https://komissarov-foundation.ru/konkurs/>; <http://lorealfellowships-russia.org/index.php?action=about>). Although a lot of such foundations' websites do not provide any information on how they designate 'young', it is clear from the requirements that the approximate age of the applicants should not exceed 27/30 years – as they are supposed to be PhD candidates at the farthest. Governmental foundations (such as the National Association of Innovation and Information Technology Development and Presidential Grants or regional governments sponsor programmes) define the age of young scholars/scientists [molodye uchenye] as 35 and 40 – with distinct categories of those who have a PhD degree and those who have a higher doctoral degree (<http://funduma.ru/molodym-uchenym/granty/>). As it can be noticed, the notion of age is conceptualised institutionally. We used this highest bar of 40 years old for 'young scholars' in our paper when selecting respondents.

- available information on academic mobility (both as student and lecturer/research fellow, qualification programmes, summer schools)¹⁰,
- working and/or studying experience at the HSE (all the respondents selected were part of the university either in Moscow or Saint-Petersburg campus).

Respectively, 12 respondents were professors/teachers at the HSE (Moscow campus) at the moment of the interview. 2 respondents were BA/MA students at HSE before they were inbred as professors/teachers/administration staff. One of the interviewees held a teaching position at HSE (Saint-Petersburg campus) a few years before he gave the interview.

All the respondents received their Bachelor's (or equivalent) degree in the period of the two first post-soviet decades and were part of academia¹¹ by 2008. That year is considered by some scholars crucial for the quantity of student cohort in Russia: until 2008, the number of students in higher education institutions rose respectively to the numbers of children born before the transitional period of the 1990s. The first post-soviet decade's demographic pit shaped the respective decline in numbers of young people ready to enter university in 2008 and the following years (Smolentseva 2016: 171). Thus, higher education institutions faced financial shortcuts by the government and continued to be in the transition process while also having such new features as tuition fees (novelty introduced by the 1992 education law) (ibid). We suppose that such a condition of higher education institutions shaped in a certain way the perception of university and its features for our respondents as they were observing those processes if not meddled in them.

Information from 6 interviews with young scholars did not come up in this research. Their testimonies did not contain any information on their academic mobility experience. However, in 2 cases, we could precisely establish (using sources other than their interviews) that they had at least one such experience. Two of those respondents had a rich history of academic mobility journeys (both short- and long-term ones – almost every year in the 2000s–early 2010s) but did not explicitly mention them in the interview¹². The other respondent only slightly touches that topic and mentions in passing his 'systematic scholarships abroad during his student years' (D. A. Dobrovolsky, 2017). I. I. Shilova-Varyash (2013) had no academic mobility experience (not traceable in the interview or other sources) – although she had an (unsuccessful) interaction with international research foundations and their grant programmes. G. O. Babkova participated in short-term mobility (academic conference in

¹⁰ At the same time, we also looked into those interviews where the respondents omitted such experience (although we know from other sources that they had it) or those where the informants had no such experience.

¹¹ Meaning that they were holding a research or/and a teaching position.

¹² This interview was not published as the respondent did not give his consent – that is why we cannot mention his name. The interview was taken in 2017. The other one belonged to A. Y. Vinogradov, and was taken in 2012.

Strasbourg) a few years after the interview was taken – and provided no information on previous experience (we did not find any data on this in her curriculum vitae as well).

The ‘Brain Drain’ Concept and the Academic Mobility Types

For certain reasons, the notion of ‘brain drain’ (as we suppose, deriving from journalistic headlines from the 1990s newspapers¹³) took place as a scientific description of the process of emigration of scholars and scientists from post-soviet Russia. Indeed, the phenomenon was notable and a sort of a characteristic of the 1990s (and still is). On the other hand, for the researchers from the Soviet Union, those were the times of their first journeys abroad and encounters with the ‘Western’ scientific world. It is peculiar, though, how the younger generation of scholars perceived such possibilities of academic trips in foreign countries and universities.

In the examined interviews with young scholars the term ‘brain drain’ is not used to describe academic mobility experience. In modern social studies that concept is usually utilised to refer to a phenomenon of emigration of scientists and scholars after the collapse of the Soviet Union (Oushkalov 1998; Malakha 1998; Ascheulova et al. 2012; Allakhverdian 2014). Although the term ‘brain drain’ can be found in some studies on international mobility conducted by international researchers¹⁴, its Russian equivalent and literal translation (‘utechka mozgov/umov’) are more frequently used – not only by the ‘older’ generation of scientists and scholars that specialise in demography studies but also by journalists and public figures. Apparently, this term is not named by the young scholars because it has lost its relevance for them. For instance, I. N. Inishev mentions that the reduction of the professors at the Faculty of Cultural Studies at HSE was due to their new opportunities. In particular, to go abroad for a PhD degree. Nevertheless, Inishev and other scholars do not express it in terms of a ‘drain brain’ phenomenon.

At the same time, a generation gap might also be taken into account: the formation of the respondents took place in ‘multi-ideological’ years (the 1990s) – no prepared explanatory scenario was imposed, especially in ‘non-conservative’ universities (e.g., Russian State University for the Humanities and Higher School of Economics) that some of the respondents graduated from (Marey

¹³ A lot of newspapers and quasi-scientific articles were published with headlines that included the combination of words ‘brain drain’. They are available at this resource: <http://www.prometeus.nsc.ru/archives/exhibits/scielit.ssi#drain>.

¹⁴ It is often compared to the ‘brain (re)gain’ process that signifies the situation in which the accepting country gains from intellectuals’ mobility. The accepting country’s role might be played by the ‘donor’-country when scientists come back there after a while – or a country of emigration of the latter (e.g., Subbotin, Aref 2020; Fahey et al. 2010; Bhandari, Blumental 2011).

E. S., Babkova G. O., Dobrovolsky D. A., Chirikov I. S.). A reasonable explanation of the same attitude for some others – their origin/background means that they finished their undergraduate studies outside of Moscow. Since all the advanced scholar institutions were based in the capital of the Russian Soviet Socialist Republic (that became the Russian Federation), the main ‘brain drain’ flow must have been observed there but not in state regional universities. Hence, the social reality of the respondents who came to Moscow to continue their studies was formed by a more closed community less touched by a fluctuation of academic migration¹⁵ (Antonova V. K., Inishev I. N., Prisyazhniuk D. I., Vdovin A. V.).

That might also be explained, perhaps, by common ethical principles of corporate solidarity (especially if we consider the university model such as HSE as a corporation¹⁶): exposing a personal attitude to the relocation of colleagues abroad can be a violation of the principles of this corporate culture and chaotisation of the conversation (Sokolov, Titayev 2013). Besides, under certain circumstances, young respondents could have made the same choice (to leave the country) – if they were challenged enough by political or economic conditions. Alternatively, they have already chosen to limit their mobility to a temporary stay abroad and return to Russia afterwards.

That leads us to their testimonies and possible explanations of this assumed situation. The years during which those young scholars were experiencing the becoming of their academic careers (graduate and postgraduate studies, postdoctoral fellowships) – 2000s – appeared to be relatively stable (comparing to the previous decade of 1990s existing in the collective memory of scholars as chaotic and obscure), characterized by economic growth and increased level of well-being.

The terms used to describe academic mobility by those who participate in it vary. Although the usage of terms is not usually related to those accepted in social sciences, respondents frequently choose the needed connotation when talking about experience and might attribute the meaning that would reflect their goals and emotions.

That is why we decided to categorise academic mobility experience of the respondents (based on their own recollections and used vocabulary) in order to determine the types of academic mobility that Russian young scholars were familiar with. These types might be divided into two groups according to the continuance of the stay abroad – long-term and short-term ones (Teichler 2015). It should be noticed as well that the main feature of any type of academic mobility is the non-permanent physical displacement across borders with specific purposes of work or education (Ibid: 9).

¹⁵ Although scholars might have migrated from those regional universities to Moscow for financial reasons, the ‘brain drain’ concept is conventionally applicable to those migrating from one country to another.

¹⁶ For the application of the term ‘corporation’ to university see the issue of *Neprikosnovenniy Zapas* 2006 (48–49:4).

As for the short-term mobility, such academic practices as scientific conferences, summer schools, internships, and professional development systems were named by the interviewees. The long-term academic mobility (that requires a certain time and cultural rupture with the country of origin or even sets premises for emigration [ibid]) is mainly represented in our sources by attending a professorship or a lecturer position in a university abroad, research internships, and Master's and PhD programmes in non-Russian universities.

The most common reasons for academic mobility among young scientists were conferences abroad (7 people) and research internships (6 people). The geographical span of the interviewees lies mostly within the European borders. Though it is not the focus of this paper, we have built a map that indicates academic mobility loci (in appendix 2). We decided to undertake such an attempt to see which non-Russian universities young scholars were choosing as places beneficial for their future academic careers. It is clear from our knowledge about those scholars and the information they share in the interviews that Master's or/and PhD programmes were entered to fulfill this concrete goal in most of the cases. For professors, scientists, and administrative staff, academic mobility might have had the following meaning: the possibility of scientific research and teaching activities, internships, and the exchange of professional experience in different countries-participants of the Bologna Process (also in the USA and other anglophone countries). It should be noted that these mobility programmes are a significant component of the intergovernmental higher education reform process, but they are not mandatory and implemented in the framework of projects prepared by universities (Chistikhvalov et al. 2008; Huisman 2019; Torotcoi 2017). Although for the scholars that were part of the HSE (while studying or at the beginning of the academic career) academic mobility was an important feature – partly because it was embedded in the university agenda of entering the international academic world at largest scale as possible (Froumin 2011).

For instance, one of the youngest scholars among the selection of the interviewees – I.S. Chirikov, who graduated from the HSE in 2007 and was later inbred for an administrative position, pays much attention to his foreign internship during his postgraduate studies:

'Around that time [PhD at the HSE – authors' note], I realized that I had to go for an internship. I was very busy with projects at the Institute of Education and worked as a consultant at the World Bank for a couple of projects. I realized that I needed a break and applied for an internship. Why Stanford? Not only because this university is one of the most famous in the world, but also because it is the birthplace of all the basic concepts of sociology of organizations' (I. S. Chirikov 2018).

The importance of the oral testimonies we use lies not only in the availability of descriptions of the experience itself but also in reasons for it that are revealed in the narrative. To sum up the story of Chirikov, here is his quote that helps to understand his reasons for mobility and, at the same time – to indicate the institutional problems the Russian post-soviet higher education system had to deal with:

'There, I realized how far from advanced scientific research I was and how much more I have to learn to be at the forefront of scientific research. I brought two suitcases of books from Stanford, which helped me a lot to develop a substantial understanding, and I wrote my dissertation' (I.S. Chirikov 2018)

Six of the respondents participated in academic mobility during the last stage of their postgraduate studies. As we presume, the destinations of their mobility programmes were chosen according to their fields and topics of research. From the narratives of the youngest scholars who received PhD degree abroad or spent some time in foreign countries to write their research, their initiative is not straightforward and easy to identify. They mention such academic journeys vaguely and in a casual way, without going into much of a detail. For instance:

'Then I went to Germany for six months to write my diploma thesis, and after my return and defense it was clear that I would teach German...' (K.A. Levinson 2017)

'...but when I was a postgraduate student, I spent a month in Madrid for an internship at the Complutense University' (E.S. Marey 2018).

These scholars – mostly historians – described spending time at a foreign university as an opportunity to work with original sources that were later used in their theses. For example, E.V. Akelyev, who was a student at the Russian State University for the Humanities at the beginning of the 2000s, had a chance to go to France to conduct research work for his Master's and then PhD degrees. This decision was determined by the academic milieu of his alma mater and its close academic relationships with the Historical Center of Marc Bloch in Europe (E. V. Akelyev, 2012).

Respondents did not explicitly express the impact that postgraduate mobility had on their career prospects and work practices. However, based on the information from the interviews and scholars' curricula vitarum, these academic trips became their first encounters with the 'Western' academia. In this regard, we might presume that different national educational contexts played a more significant role in their future research practices. Analyzing further foreign academic activities of scholars with PhD degrees from non-Russian universities, it can be stated that their participation in conferences and scientific internships in Europe and other parts of the world were more frequent (see appendix) as they were not feeling themselves unfamiliar with the international academic community.

Not only the research practices of the scholars benefited from the foreign postgraduate studies – receiving a PhD degree from a European/American university might be considered as a boost for their careers in academia. E. V. Akelyev, in particular, points that out : ‘...when Alexander Borisovich [Kamensky – currently the head of the School of History at HSE] – was creating the History Department, he invited many teachers from Russian State University to Vyshka [unofficial name for the Higher School of Economics accepted by those who are part of the university], including me. In addition, the PhD degree that I was able to obtain [in France] has played an important role’. It may seem to be a more pragmatic explanation of academic mobility – we do not encounter this narrative in the studied interviews that often.

Nevertheless, considering the issue of obtaining a PhD degree abroad in the scholars’ testimonies we come across a wide range of descriptive tools which do not lead to one-sided explanation or purpose. For example, one respondent, V. I. Antonova, had a series of experience in research internships in the United States and Canada in the period from 1998 to 2006. She only decided to receive her PhD degree much later, in 2009. For that purpose, she went to the University of Essex. Shortly after completing her postgraduate studies, Antonova became a professor at the Department of General Sociology and a professor at the Higher School of Urban Studies (HSE) in 2010, and also was assigned to the position of Academic Supervisor of the Graduate School of Sociological Sciences. Two conclusions might be made out of this case. Firstly, the former acquaintance with foreign academia¹⁷ could become the factor of interviewee’s choice – where to study for the PhD degree. The second observation is an additional illustration to the above described case of E. V. Akelyev – Antonova’s career drastically changed after her PhD degree from a renowned European university.

At the same time, speaking about the first academic trips, the scholar observes that ‘...when you start working with Western research organizations, with foundations, and with the universities yourself, where you are placed as a researcher, teacher, or intern. You begin to develop a completely different perspective on the world. You feel involved in all of these huge and multiple processes that used to either pass you by or you had not really felt yourself right in them’ (V. I. Antonova, 2013). This outlines a different conceptual framework for describing academic mobility – the concept of excellence.

For another respondent – I. S. Chirikov – his research experience at the University of California, Berkeley, and involvement in international projects (that inspired him to offer to the HSE faculty to join those) were also beneficial for his career, in his own words. It should also be noted that

¹⁷ We use this term here and in other cases in the sense of a collective reference to foreign universities network with their education practices, culture and interactions.

he explicitly states that a career in a university was not his initial desire – but the experience he gained during his studies abroad and his own network of acquaintances in academic/intellectual milieu become decisive factors for him to continue his career in university.

Furthermore, this example of his leads to another aspect which embraces the outcomes of every academic mobility experience and the idea of ‘innovative’ universities – the concept of excellence in education and the academic world. The interviewee’s instance illustrates the significance of academic mobility abroad for the concept of excellence in university (HSE) – as a community of highly professional scholars recruited because of their own previous academic connections and for their excellence esteemed by what they (allegedly) gained during their short/long-term academic journeys. This stance surely requires a more grounded approach with application of Social Network theory and community study (Sokolov et al. 2012).

The Idea of the University and the Concept of ‘Excellence’

In the interviews, the issue of making an idea out of a university has two different perspectives that are closely interconnected. One of them may be expressed as the ‘materialistic-aesthetic component’ (I. N. Inishev, 2017), which would serve as a base for a more sophisticated and broad idea of the university itself. The former level implies the organization of the physical space, the latter reflects on the idealistic mission and functions of the university.

When speaking about academic mobility, the respondents tend to start their narratives descriptively: where they went, in what year – not always, though, going into specific details about their mobility agents (grant programmes, foundations, or institutions). As previously pointed out, more profound reasonings about these trips' grounds and outcomes are not frequent. However, most of the interviewees who mention their international mobility background first describe the environment of European and American universities. In general, this approach is specific to those scholars among the interviewees who came to the HSE from other institutions (as former students and/or researchers not in HSE). They tend to oppose Russian principles of designing university space to the European ones. For instance, this contrast was strongly highlighted in two testimonies about German academia:

‘In Germany, there are libraries at universities with an extremely high capacity. In America, for example, there is a library service that delivers the needed book to the professor's office after a certain amount of time. Unfortunately, we do not have anything similar; in Moscow, there is a serious scientific library only at Moscow State University. On the other hand, the university gives me a place

where I can work in peace. It is quieter here than at my home. In this way, the university is more or less successful in providing research work' (K.A. Levinson, 2017).

Professor Levinson expresses two dimensions of the university environment here, at some point making the comparisons on the idealistic level: there (in the 'Western' world with old university traditions) / here (in Russia with an implicit hint on the poor state of Russian science and scientific facilities as the aftermath of the turmoil years of the post-Soviet decades). Those dimensions are the 'ambiance' ('I can work in peace') and the 'materialistic' world of infrastructural support of a scholarly working process. In the respondent's opinion, those two structural elements are divergent – and that cannot make the university an embodiment of one's ideal. In his view, only the combination of these two elements – 'aesthetic' ('ambiance') and 'materialistic' (infrastructure and services) might lead to the 'incarnation' of the idea of the university (the one about fulfilling the needs of the researcher) that becomes a real space.

Here is another testimony in which the same combination ('aesthetic'/'materialistic') is represented:

'In my opinion, the German university has a better organised physical space for the presence or co-existence of students and professors. There are more comfortable campuses equipped with catering facilities or simply places for a comfortable setting. In my opinion, the university is often more focused on a model of such a campus, a kind of factory, where there are classrooms where some such intellectual work takes place in a concentrated form, and then teachers evaporate – they go home, students, if they, unfortunately, have any other classes, stay. But once this opportunity to 'evaporate' is given, they also leave the university. And German students, in my opinion, spend quite a lot of time at university with a more visible pleasure' (I.N. Inishev, 2017).

The student life is therefore closely intertwined with the idea of the university. Thus, the element of a community (one might even call it an 'imagined community' or a 'corporation' in a historical sense – both definitions might be implied according to the description of a university in Germany) is essential – for the 'aesthetic' part. From the interviewees' point of view, the university should bear administrative functions to supply and fulfill 'materialistic' needs of both faculty and students – and it is just as important as the quality of teaching. Hence, in order to make the 'idea' of university work, these elements should interact organically.

Interestingly, among the generation of young scholars who had already been attending the newly established universities (such as HSE), these references to the physical body are not traceable. One of the respondents (I. S. Chirikov) gave an answer to the question about his attitude towards the university's environment – and it is a notable illustration of that phenomenon. Chirikov calls it a 'new public management' – universities administration policy with the focus on their efficiency (or, we

might say, ‘excellence’). For him, ‘*this [the requirement to be as efficient as possible] is a serious point of tension, especially for those who are socialised in a less bureaucratic culture. For my generation, it is probably a minor problem*’ (I. S. Chirikov, 2018). In this case, the environment is no longer connected to the physical body and even understood in a sense of productivity and external pressure from the *worldwide academia* to be more prolific. The environment becomes a responsibility of university administration – but not the academic community. Hence, the idea of the university becomes affected by and affiliated with ‘bureaucratic’ actions of ‘new public management’.

This concept might also be expressed as the ‘excellence’ one. The idea of excellence in education has been receiving more attention from both governmental institutions and their public policies and scholars in the last years (Carli et al. 2019; Herschberg et al. 2018). The concept itself was introduced in the Cold War period by policymakers to address the issue of unsatisfying schooling and further education in the United States of America (Schulz, Muller 1986: 145). Decades later, ‘excellence’ is still applied to speak about the same topics (excellence in teaching, learning, providing opportunities for both¹⁸) – and is still being developed and refined. ‘Excellence’ stands for challenges (on individual and institutional levels) and the ability to overcome them and perform on edge (see, for example, the *Report of the Seminar of the European Network of Education Councils*, Amsterdam, 21–22 May 2012; Inamorato dos Santos, A., Gaušas, S., Mackevičiūtė, R., Jotautytė, A., Martinaitis, Ž. *Innovating Professional Development in Higher Education: An analysis of practices*, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, 2019).

This idea of exceptionally high performance in education (both receiving and providing) was reflected as well in the Bologna Process of higher education restructuring in Europe. As Russia took part in the process, Russian universities had to accept this idea – especially those designed (as HSE) to match international standards of peak performance. Academic mobility was one of the newly established principles, a cornerstone even (Teichler 2015; Froumin 2011).

As it might have been noticed in the previous quotations, young scholars add one more dimension to the subject – student life. Some of the respondents articulated it through the comparison with Western academia as well¹⁹:

¹⁸ See, for example, the debates on Teaching Excellence: Tsui, Amy B. M. 2015. A Critical Commentary on Ray Land and George Gordon ‘Teaching Excellence Initiatives: Modalities and Operational Factors’ (https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/system/files/downloads/tsui_commentary_to_land_and_gordon.pdf). Also: Skelton, A. 2004. Understanding ‘teaching excellence’ in higher education: a critical evaluation of the National Teaching Fellowships Scheme. *Studies in Higher Education* (29:4): 451-468.

¹⁹ The scholars with less frequent international academic experience still use comparative assessments. For instance, D. I. Prisyazhnyuk contrasts student life in Moscow and Saratov – the center and the periphery (D. I. Prisyazhnyuk, 2018).

'I have always been interested in the fundamental difference in understanding what student life in Russia and Europe is, if we classify Estonia as Europe. The fact is that when I came to Tartu, it immediately struck me that they have no student life. At least in the way I had imagined it. And how did I imagine it? It was very simple. What is student life made of? Apart from studying, it's a field of creativity, sports and science, and there's also a [student] union line... In Estonia, therefore, student life mainly consists of parties in different places, but it is always informal and almost never linked to the university as a structure' (A.V. Vdovin, 2013).

Vdovin later mentions that he lacked the regulation of this student life in the form of organisations affiliated with university. In her interview, E. S. Marey highlights the idea of a protest at the Spanish university, where she spent three months during her postgraduate studies and gave lectures later (E.S. Marey, 2017). In comparison with Vdovin's perception of 'active' student life, she connects it to activities that were taking place without university administration's regulation or facilities. As she says, *'I realised that student life in Madrid – at least at Complutense – is much more vibrant than student life in Moscow. The whole faculty yard was decorated with political and social slogans – for example, feminist ones – and there were constant calls for strikes and rallies. The energy of protest could be felt. I can't say students' learning process, unfortunately, because I haven't taught [there] for a long time'* (E. S. Marey, 2017). Hence, this component (student life), in her perception, is excluded from a 'higher' idea of the university – because student life organises itself without being part of university administration or faculty. On the other hand, such 'political' student life still takes place at the campus and involves the student body (a significant part of a university community). Thus, student life is an element that corresponds with both the 'aesthetic-materialistic' part ('ambience' of the protests / faculty yard that has enough space for the rallies and decorations with slogans) and the idea of university (meaning that the university might be a place for self-expression).

The quotations mentioned above are valuable for comprehending the concept of the university idea. The interviewees did recall those stories from their academic mobility experience when answering questions that were not explicitly connected to that topic. In some cases, the idea itself is presented in broader terms and expressions, provoked by a direct question from the interviewer; in others – by spontaneous and extended reflections of the respondent. An example of the latter is the following consideration, which also shows that the idea of the university became strongly entwined with the concept of excellence for young scholars:

'The university is a trendsetter of the spirit of a highly intellectual and spiritually advanced cultural person. The aim is to set the bar high and to promote science, both applied and fundamental, and prepare those members of society who will carry the flag of this high standards further and even higher' (V. K. Antonova, 2013).

Conclusion

For young scholars, academic mobility was an option to broaden their cultural and educational perspectives – especially when their plans for academic career required so. It was particularly true for those who participated in more long-term mobility projects (such as Master’s and/or PhD programmes and tenured employment such as professorship/lectureship). At the same time, short-term mobility became an essential feature for young researchers – as a means of being included in the international academic context that was keeping (and still does) their research up to date through discussions with international colleagues or discovering of new sources, approaches, and insights (Teichler 2015). For the scholars whose interviews we investigated it seemed that academic mobility of any type was not an exceptional opportunity (as it was for the generation of Soviet scholars) but a routine, normal possibility provided and encouraged by universities.

Among the respondents there were those who had experience in both short- and long-term academic mobility journeys, on different stages of their education. However, as it has been discovered, the scholars who became familiar with the international academia only through short-term mobility programmes reflected on the idea of university in a different manner. The following quote indicates that their perception of the phenomenon of academic mobility was broader, but they also appreciated its value: *‘I think that academic mobility will develop, and you can’t get away with it. It is possible that the professors will no longer be so attached to the university. Especially because there is a trend now’* (E. A. Okun’kova, 2017). As that respondent did not have any long-term academic mobility experience (only short-term quality experts programme), she neglects all the other elements of such experience that were shared and described by others who participated in long-term mobility journeys.

Thus, we highlighted the multidimensional narratives about that experience among those scholars. They focus primarily not on the fundamental idea of the university but on the ‘aesthetic’ and ‘materialistic’ components of the university space in the first place. From this perspective the crucial task of an ‘excellent’, innovative university is to support research practices and supply all the members of the university with facilities that would make their time spent there more comfortable (both for studying/teaching/research and spare time – such as lunch time, for instance).

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Appendix 1. Table of respondents with the information on their education, academic mobility experience with indication of types, place and time spans.

Full name	Academic position at the time of the interview	Education	Types of academic mobility experience	Place and years	Colour code on the map
Viktoria Konstantinovna Antonova	Associate Professor, lecturer at the Higher School of Economics	Candidate of Science (1995) - specialty "Social structure, social institutions and social processes". PhD: University of the Essex (2009) - specialised in "Sociological Sciences". "Doctor of Sociology (2002)	- Research internships - Teaching (untenured employment) -Conferences	USA, Valdosta State University, Department of Political Science Canada, Carleton University 1998-2006	Purple
Elena Aleksandrovna Okun'kova	Head of the Department of Academic Policy and Organization of the Educational Process at Moscow State University, Associate Professor of the Department of General and Applied Linguistics at Moscow State University	Candidate of Science (PhD) in Philology, Moscow State Pedagogical University (2010)	- Professional development system - Quality experts programme	Varna University of Management (Bulgaria)	Pink
Kirill Alekseevich Levinson	Candidate of Historical Sciences, Associate Professor, leading researcher at the Poletayev Institute for	PhD: Tubingen Eberhardt and Karl University (2019), PhD in History (2009), Moscow State University, Faculty of History,	-Postgraduate Studies -Research internships -Conferences	Bremen (1993), Innsbruck and Vienna, one-year scholarship in Augsburg - thesis (1997-1998),	Red

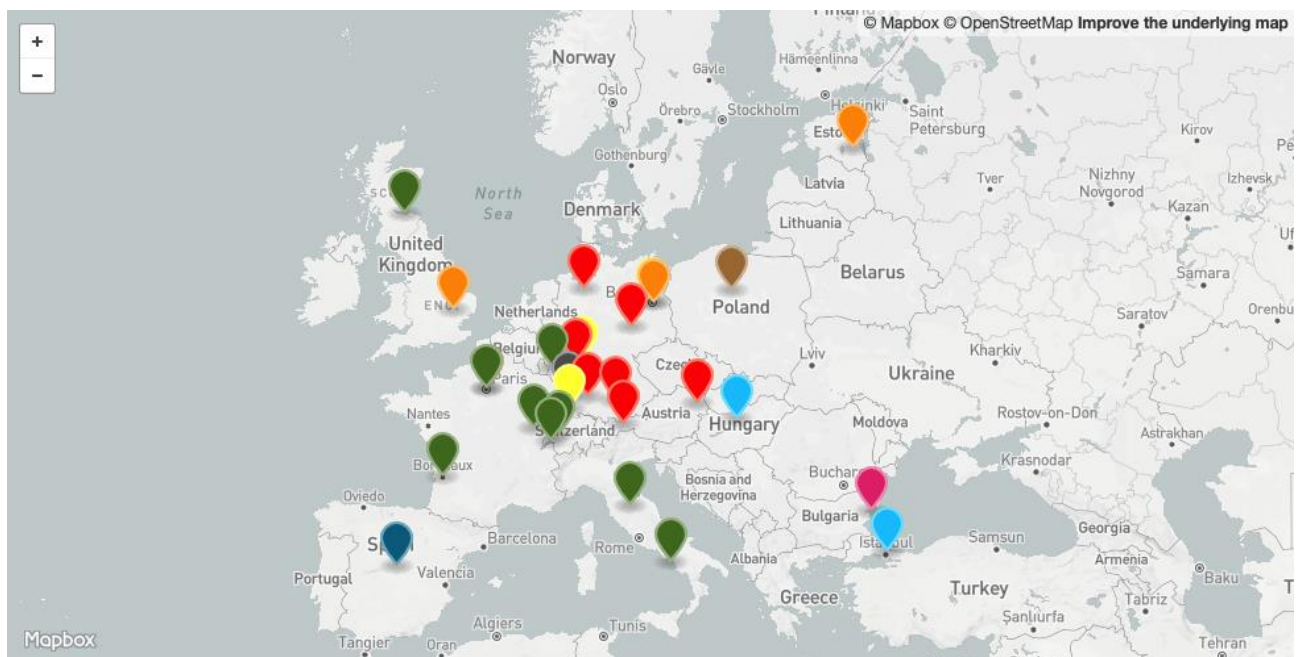
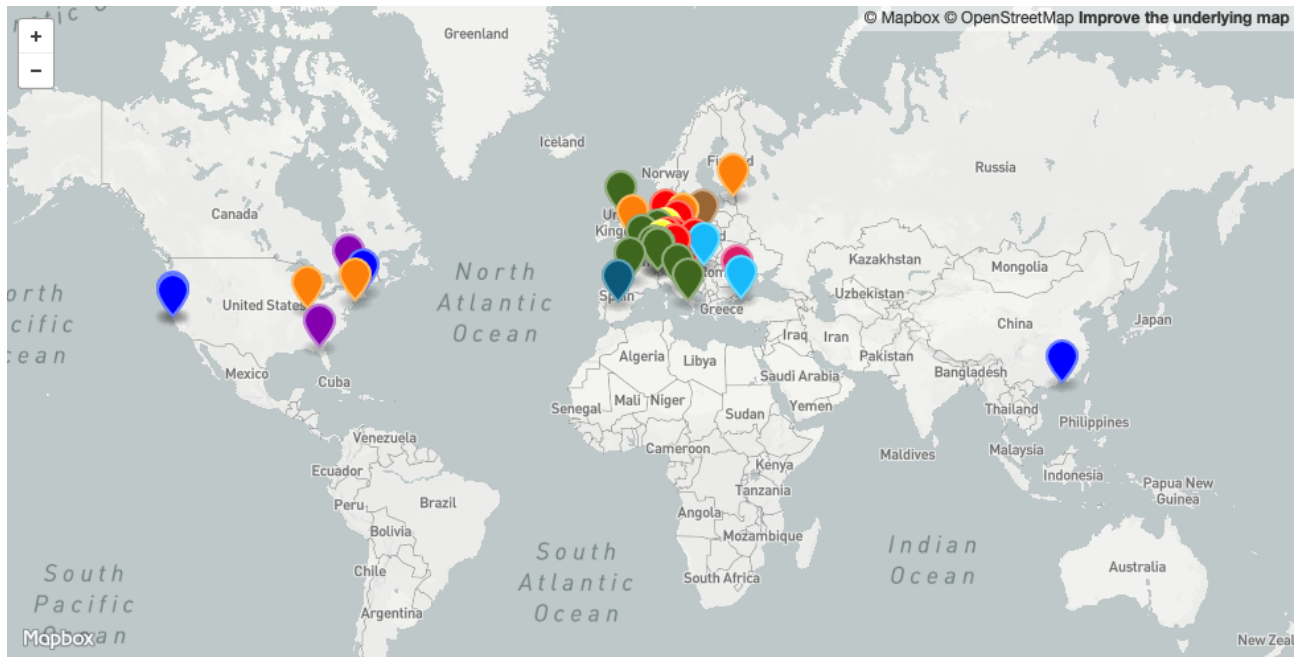
	Historical and Theoretical Studies in Humanities (HSE)	majoring in History (2003)		6-months scholarship in Mainz (2001), 2-months scholarship in Halle (2002), 2-months scholarships in Göttingen (2004, 2005), in Tübingen (2015)	
Ilya Nikolaevich Inishev	Doctor of Philosophy, Associate Professor of the Faculty of Humanities of the School of Cultural Studies, academic director of the educational program "Visual Culture"	Doctor of Philosophy (2015) PhD in philosophy (1997) Tomsk State University, Faculty: Philosophy, specialty "Philosophy" (1994)	- Research internships	Berlin, Frankfurt-am-Main and Freiburg 2002-2011	Yellow
Igor Sergeevich Chirikov	National Research University "Higher school of economics". Vice-Rector, lecturer, leading researcher of the Institute of Education of the National Research University Higher School of Economics	Bachelor: NRU 'Higher School of Economics' faculty of Social Sciences (2007). Candidate of Sociological Sciences (2013)	-Postgraduate studies -Research internships -Teaching - Conferences	Internship at Stanford University, (January-March 2012). Harvard University, Department of Sociology, (March 2015). One year in Berkeley. University of Hong Kong, Department of Education, (November 2013).	Dark-blue
Darya Igorevna Prisyazhnyuk	Deputy Dean for Academic Affairs: Faculty of	Candidate of Sociological Sciences (2012);	- Conferences -Workshops	Central European University in	Light-blue

	Social Sciences; Senior lecturer: Faculty of Social Sciences, Department of Sociology; Senior Researcher: International Laboratory for Social Integration Studies	Specialty: Saratov State University, specialty "Social Anthropology" (2009)	-Qualification training courses	Budapest. Istanbul	
Elena Sergeevna Marey	Associate Professor of the Faculty of Humanities at the Higher School of Economics	"Russian State University of Humanities, specialty: "History" (2007), Candidate of Historical Sciences (2011) Institute of General History of the Russian Academy of Sciences, specialty "General History".	-Postgraduate studies -Teaching	1 month in Madrid for an internship at the Complutense University before defending a thesis	Cyan
Darya Vladimirovna Berdnikova	Senior lecturer at the Department of Foreign Languages at the HSE	MSU Candidate of Philological Sciences (2014)	- Work experience abroad, but not related to teaching, organized trips for HSE students to other countries.	-	•
Andrey Juryevich Vinogradov	Associate Professor in the Department of Social History	Candidate of Historical Sciences: Institute of General History of the Russian Academy of Sciences,	- Postgraduate studies - Conferences	An internship at the University of Trier (Germany), DAAD scholarship (1999-2000).	Dark-green

		specialisation "Historiography, Source Studies and Methods of Historical Research" (2002); Specialisation: Moscow State University, specialisation "History" (1998)		Conferences in Paris (2001, 2005), Bordeaux (2002), Lausanne (2006), Arezzo (2007), Amalia (2007), Fribourg (2008), Dahl (2008, 2010), Edinburgh (2009).	
Aleksey Vladimirovich Vdovin	Associate Professor at the Faculty of Philology, (HSE)	Philology Faculty of Vyatka State Humanitarian University (2007) Qualification: teacher of Russian language and literature, with additional specialisation in English language. PhD: Department of Russian Literature at the University of Tartu (2007-2011)	-Postgraduate studies -Conferences - Research internships	Visiting researcher in Cambridge, Internship at the Russian and East European Institute, Indiana University, Bloomington (USA), Internship at the Department of Slavistics of Humboldt University (2015), Visiting scholar, Jordan Center, New York University (2017). Internship at the Department of Slavistics of Humboldt University, Berlin, grant program Aurora Erasmus Mundus (2015-2016).	Orange
Evegeny Vladimirovich Akelyev	Lecturer at the Faculty of the	Candidate of Sciences (PhD) in History,	-Postgraduate studies -Conferences	Conference in Paris (2009)	Brown

	Humanities (HSE)	specialisation: "National History". (2009). PhD: Université Paris-Sorbonne (Paris IV), (2009) Masters: Université Paris-Sorbonne (Paris IV), majoring in History (2006) Bachelor: Russian State University for the Humanities, Plekhanov Russian-French Centre of Historical Anthropology, Moscow. Mark Bloch Russian State University of the Humanities, specialisation in "History" (2005)		and in Poland, Torun (2012)	
Galina Olegovna Babkova	Associate Professor in the Department of Humanities, School of History	Candidate of Historical Sciences: Russian State University for the Humanities, specialisation "Russian History". Specialisation: Russian State University for the Humanities, specialisation "History"(1997)	-Conference	Conference in Strasbourg with the Study Group on Eighteenth Century Russia (2010)	Dark-grey

Appendix 2. The map with indications of academic mobility loci (by each scholar).



<https://gist.github.com/ViktoriaKobzeva/97d1ad5bf2d163c7fad1dd5f17f3799f>

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