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# 7 School of Advanced Studies, University of Tyumen

Transformation from Within?

The University of Tyumen (UTMN) is a large, comprehensive public university in the city of Tyumen, in the south of Western Siberia and 1,100 miles from Moscow. UTMN enrolls 30,000 students, primarily from within its region, and is one of the largest universities in the country. UTMN was founded in 1930 and is one of nine universities in the city of Tyumen, which has a population of nearly 700,000 people. The region is the transition point between the European and Asian areas of Russia and abuts the national border with Kazakhstan to the south. Thanks to large oil and gas holdings in the Tyumen region and its associated autonomous area, the region is prosperous.

As a regional university, UTMN is shaped, in large part, by a desire to serve local interests. Consequently, it has programs in Arctic studies and in the technological and legal dimensions of the oil and gas industries. Like other regional universities, UTMN competes for talented local students with universities in the much larger cities of Moscow and St. Petersburg. Fueled in part by a desire to compete and partly by a desire to be nationally and internationally recognized, UTMN created the School of Advanced Studies (SAS), an English-medium-of-instruction school with a faculty that has studied or worked internationally. The faculty is diverse, from ten different nations in 2021. Its first cohorts of students were primarily domestic, with many from the region or nearby areas. SAS is seen as offering a liberal arts program with an emphasis on interdisciplinary studies and student research.

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## NATIONAL CONTEXT AND THE ENABLING REGULATORY ENVIRONMENT

Russia's higher education landscape has been remade during the first thirty years of post-Soviet policymaking. Results include the introduction of a unified national entrance process and tuition fees for over half the undergraduate population; the consolidation of smaller, specialized institutes into larger comprehensive universities; and the emergence of a private sector that now enrolls about one-fifth of the student population (Platonova & Semyonov, 2018). Participation in higher education has also increased during this period, driven by family aspirations and the positional benefits of a degree. Coupled with a fall in the national youth population that left places in universities unfilled, these factors fostered the development of a "universal" higher education system (Smolentseva, 2017b). Despite these fundamental reforms in the architecture of the higher education system, the learning experience, flexibility of the curriculum, and the pedagogy on offer remain largely stilted, traditional, and stolid. Universities continue to operate in an "excessively restrictive administrative environment," and academics operate in "insular epistemic communities" (Balzer, 2011, p. 1). Participation in the Bologna process (2003–2022) produced a hybrid undergraduate curriculum, a "truncated specialist degree," and diminished the value of a master's degree (Kurrila, 2013, p. 2). It also resulted in another layer of bureaucracy, exemplified by cumbersome course documents and a quality assurance process that involves a lot of paperwork.

Over the past thirty years, successive governments have attempted to renovate the system to become more innovative and internationally competitive. These federal government initiatives focused on a small number of more prestigious universities. It was the fourth of these initiatives – the Russian government's Academic Excellence Project 5-100 – that provided the seed funding for UNTM's SAS.

The 5-100 program had an overarching goal of improving the prestige of Russian higher education, with a specific target of five Russian universities being ranked in the top 100 in the world (Forrat, 2016; Presidential decree 2012). Through 5-100, federal funds were allocated competitively, based on an expert panel's assessment of institutional proposals to improve international competitiveness. Proposals were expected to address central issues like promoting faculty research, engaging in the global academic marketplace, and creating attractive educational programs (Mäkinen, 2021).

To enhance UTMN's national and international profile, the university's leadership chose to participate in the 5-100 national excellence strategy,

submitting a proposal for what would become the SAS. UTMN's leaders saw the excellence strategy as a pathway to achieving greater regional and national visibility for UTMN, which could help it become what one leading scholar described as "a national university, not just a place in Western Siberia." One way to lift its status was to create a distinct, highly visible, and, ideally, enviable program that would differentiate UTMN from other Russian universities.

By late 2015, after two rounds of review, twenty-one universities, including UTMN, received federal financial support through this initiative. The funds involved were less important than the prestige of being one of the twenty-one successful applicants, and the 5-100 project "did make a significant impact on the research capacity and global standings of participating institutions" (Chirikov & Fedyukin, 2021, p. 235). The additional financing was limited to the eight-year life of the 5-100 program (2013–2021). After this, SAS became reliant on budget allocations from UTMN, its own fundraising, and what the university director and some of his colleagues described as its "connections to the Moscow stakeholders." UTMN and, by extension, SAS are able to compete for funds under the national Program of Strategic Academic Leadership, which is a ten-year plan building on the 5-100 program.

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## OVERVIEW AND KEY FEATURES OF SAS

SAS presents itself as the "most international" BA program in Russia and the first "liberal arts school" outside the big metropolises. It concedes the claim of "first in the nation" to the academic partnership between Bard College and St. Petersburg State University, which operated from 1998 to 2021 when it was closed because Bard was deemed to be "undesirable" and threatening the "constitutional order" of Russia (Luxmore, 2021). SAS offers a broadly based core curriculum, which most students cover in the first two years. It includes some English classes to develop language skills, as well as classes in physical education, health, and safety to satisfy State requirements. Students are expected to select a major for the final two years, with each major offering a mix of mandatory courses, independent studies, and internships. During the final third of their degree program, students can select electives from an array that varies from year to year; faculty offer these courses based on their interests and expertise or to address a contemporary issue.

SAS is a small school of about twenty-five faculty, with its first two cohorts of graduates numbering less than fifty each. Most students are supported by

the State, with only about 10 percent self-financing their tuition. Some interviewees referred to SAS as akin to an honors college, while others deemed this a misnomer because it does not capture the research-intensive culture that SAS is pursuing. Instruction is in English; the faculty is largely international or “with degrees from famous universities.” Recruiting junior faculty has not been a challenge, but, like many new sites, SAS has found it more difficult to attract senior scholars. The director, who is usually credited with the basic design of the school, views SAS as pursuing two strategic goals. In the research field, SAS aims to be interdisciplinary. In education, SAS is pursuing the “liberal arts and sciences paradigm for talented students” and serving as a national “laboratory to develop new . . . approaches . . . [which] Ideally . . . will influence the operations of other Russian universities” (Shcherbenok, 2021).

Two key design features distinguish SAS from UTMN and almost all universities in Russia: a commitment to “individualization” and delayed specialization. These two principles shape much of the ethos of SAS, including the design of its curriculum, its assessment and academic integrity policies, and its conception of student responsibilities. There are many other characteristics of SAS that make it stand out in the Russian higher education landscape. Its language of instruction is English, and the bulk of class sessions are small seminars rather than large lectures. Most faculty members in SAS are foreigners or have higher degrees from foreign universities. SAS promotes interdisciplinary studies and independent study, and it encourages academic writing by its students – something that is relatively rare in Russian universities. SAS also places a premium on research and research publications from its faculty, a priority that reflects both its stated culture and the national priority assigned to international citation indices (Oleksiyenko, 2021). It operates in a purpose-built modern facility and has a distinct, highly competitive process for recruiting faculty. There is no department structure within SAS, and faculty are expected to work with each other across disciplines, both on research projects and in course design. Similarly, students are not assigned to a discipline but work in a “common educational space” and are expected to engage with faculty from different fields. Students are also expected to conduct a year-long research project under faculty supervision. The absence of departmental structures is meant to encourage the development of “soft skills” and foster students’ commitment to “deep learning.”

All of these are of some note in the regional and national contexts; however, the defining quality or key organizing principle seems to be placing the student at the heart of the educational process. In practice this might

mean making the student the actor and key decisionmaker in constructing their program of study as well as identifying possible postgraduation destinations. This is not the norm for many Russian universities that are built around the primacy of disciplines and vocationally specific degree programs that offer nationally approved curricula and very little student choice.

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## INDIVIDUALIZATION

The concepts of humanism and individualization are recurring themes in post-Soviet Russian commentary about the desirable characteristics of an effective, high-quality education. They are prominent in federal policy documents like the July 10, 1992, Law of Education, which directed educators to regard education as “humanist” and promote students’ self-determination. Krylova (1998) discussed shifts in the values underpinning Russian education in the immediate post-Soviet period, arguing that this framework placed “individualization” as the first of four elements that should be applied in assessing the effectiveness of education.

This represents a significant shift; as Bannykh, Kostina, and Novikova (2019, p. 2345) observed, the Soviet legacy is an education system that “has never been varied, it has always been dominated by the invariant.” The structure and the content of the curriculum are marked by a “traditional rigidity.” This may be why education has been, as one of our interviewees observed, the last sphere in the Russian economy to individualize as market forces and consumer preferences replaced State planning and *diktat*. This has been a slow process, with the Soviet legacy persisting. Libman’s 2021 study of the historical legacies of communism concluded that although the Communist Party of the Soviet Union “ceased to exist almost three decades ago, it appears very much alive . . . in Russian bureaucracy and the outcomes of public policy” (p. 299).

The notion of *individualization* recurred in our conversations and is one of the lodestones in SAS’s definition of excellence, shaping many aspects of the institution’s operations. Sometimes the term was used to describe how SAS perceived its students; at others it was a shorthand way to describe SAS’s emphasis on a student’s choice of study. The concept was also used to underscore the fact that SAS saw the postgraduation destination of students as a matter for the individual – something to be addressed differently by each student depending on their aspirations, motivation, and experience. Individualization also shaped faculty perceptions of their roles and how they

related to students. Similarly, it shaped students' self-perception as independent learners. One student commented that she particularly liked how SAS gave her a sense of agency and is a place where "you can decide things for yourself." At SAS, students had the "ability to talk with professors and administrators . . . which is very unusual in Russia. [Here] you feel yourself as an agent and as a person who can influence the education process."

As we will illustrate later, there are differences in emphasis, nuance, and expression, but the theme of individualization recurred in nearly all interviews as well as in many of the foundational statements and documents we examined.

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## CONCEPTIONS OF A STUDENT

Nearly all the SAS people we interviewed referred to how their students differed from other UTMN students and Russian higher education students more broadly. SAS students are generally viewed as more discerning. Describing the boutique qualities of SAS, one senior academic leader commented that SAS "serves students who want to work hard, students who want more, students who are well prepared for class." A faculty member familiar with the first four cohorts of SAS students commented that "we attract very unusual students who are just attracted to these unusual things like group work formats, like creative self-expression, essays, things like that."

This theme of the distinctive nature of students was echoed by many we spoke with, including a senior SAS faculty member who observed that SAS "students are all looking for something they cannot get elsewhere in the Russian system: English language instruction and foreign faculty and a liberal arts program, a window into another way of thinking." SAS was also described as a "cool" place that attracts students who see themselves as different from the wider community, be it in terms of identity, aspirations, or sexuality. One of the administrators of SAS commented that it was easy to tell SAS students from mainstream UTMN students as they were "more likely to protest" or question an administrative decision or requirement. SAS students see themselves as "chosen," and one student interviewee observed that "SAS is not for everyone" because it is an "unstable environment but a place of intense learning."

These conceptions are starkly different from the idea of the student as a soldier that Kuraev (2016) used to personify the Soviet "militarization of Russian academia," where "every student had to obey every administrative

directive without objection. Discipline and order ruled Soviet academia: Institutional administration was the governing body, faculty represented officers, and students were soldiers” (p. 188). There are echoes of this Soviet model in most Russian universities, especially in more recent years when the State has reexerted its control over academic life, promoting “moral education” and “respect for the Motherland” (Chirikov & Fedjukin, 2021, p. 230). Conversely SAS students tend to be seen as consumers or clients exercising some discretion, including what courses to take, what field to specialize in, and what career paths to pursue. This is apparent in the way SAS has structured the choice of subjects and assigned responsibility for choosing postgraduation destinations.

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### **ASSIGNMENT OF RESPONSIBILITY FOR SUBJECT OF STUDY AND FOR CAREER GOALS**

SAS students are expected to take personal responsibility for choosing their subjects of study and for narrowing the range of possible postgraduation opportunities they might pursue. As one senior academic leader observed, “the student is the main actor in the education process.” This makes some parents of SAS students uneasy because they expect a Russian higher education institution to be a bridge between a student’s program of work and an occupation, as this was the norm in the Soviet model. In the absence of a State-led process, some parents believe that SAS should tell the students what jobs to take. One senior administrator described a typical conversation with parents in the following way:

Very often [parents] ask what is the future for my children, what’s his profession, or what would he do after the university? And for this question I always answer, “What do you want him to do after the university?” Some [parents] say “But I send my students to you . . . I don’t want to decide for my children.” [To which I] say, “And why should I decide for your children if you don’t want to decide for your children? Okay, maybe we should ask your child about what he want to do.”

Parents desire the surety offered by the idea from the pre-*perestroika* era that a student would be “trained by the state to serve the state using state-sponsored training for the benefit of the state” (Kuraev, 2016, p. 187). Their expectations are fueled in part by the persistence of the utilitarian notion that, even in a post-Soviet economy, the main task of higher education is “the

training of specialists” in fields needed by the nation, even if the State’s planning and assignment role is now dormant (Smolentseva, 2017a, pp. 223–224). Parents do not want to take the responsibility but are also not ready to leave it to their children. Instead, as a university administrator involved with SAS since its inception remarked, SAS is built on the notion that students “have different motivations, and only students can decide it about his future not the university . . . Every student decides what to learn and what his education path will be.”

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## SELF-MOTIVATION

The emphasis on individual responsibility is challenging in a new institution with evolving policies and an emerging culture. This is true for both students and some faculty. For students who mostly came from the highly structured Russian school system, the SAS environment can be frustrating or opaque. While there are quite harsh and explicit policies about class attendance and academic progress, the emphasis on individual responsibility can appear as institutional indifference. Coupled with the absence of parental strictures and without a certain track to a specialized occupation, SAS students needed to be self-motivated. They do not have the “pragmatism of practical training” (Kuraev, 2016, p. 183) to cushion their path to paid employment and soften the press for high grades and steady progress to graduation. Instead, they are supposed to adopt the values and mores of individualism and excellence.

The uncertainty that comes from the absence of explicit links between courses of study and an occupation is deepened by SAS’s curriculum model, which echoes the breadth of learning opportunities embedded in the liberal arts tradition and values general education over occupationally specific learning. The practice of declaring a major at the end of the second year of study means that SAS students explore different intellectual traditions before opting for a particular field, without a certain vocational point of reference to help them make choices or motivate their efforts. For many parents, the generality of course titles like “The City as Text” does not grant the same solidity and comfort as *Introduction to Electrical Engineering*. Yet, delayed specialization and a requirement that students cover a range of fields are key elements of SAS’s academic programs. It is one of the qualities that makes SAS so distinctive in its national environment, even though it is a longstanding, familiar component of liberal arts education in the US context. At the same time, the director of SAS emphasized that it “has its own conception of the liberal arts.



It is not simply a copy of Amherst, and it has only one-and-a-half competitors in Russia.” SAS aims to prepare its individual students for “life in general” using a program of study shaped in some part by “their particular needs and desires” (Kimball, 1986, p. 194), and offers a flexibility not traditionally available in Russian higher education, where needs and desires can emerge and be refined through the initial years of study.

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## DELAYED SPECIALIZATION

Most people we spoke with, particularly those with a direct experience of Russian higher education, stressed that the curricular structure of SAS was starkly different from the local norm. They mentioned SAS’s common core courses and students’ choice of courses of study as examples of practices that were novel when SAS was conceived and which quickly influenced practice in the rest of UTMN. SAS’s approach to learning has also attracted attention from other Russian institutions.

Others remarked on how the absence of subject departments was different from conventional arrangements and allowed faculty to design and deliver interdisciplinary courses more readily. Even to this day, Russian universities tend to be organized along the quasi-vocational lines that underpinned Stalin’s reorganization of higher education in the late 1920s. David-Fox (1997) called this process the “great break in higher learning,” which culminated in “banish(ing)” the “social and humanistic disciplines” from universities and making the “technological, engineering and natural sciences” predominant (p. 264). In essence, the reorganization tied academic departments or schools to functional ministries and fostered narrow specialization in curricula (Azimbayeva, 2017).

This narrow, vocational orientation contrasts with the breadth, flexibility, and variety in the SAS academic program. In the view of a senior administrator with university-wide responsibilities, what SAS offers is “markedly different from the traditional Russian model where the student enters a department and specializes from the beginning with the expectation of being prepared for a vocational destination. There is no changing path – mid stream – you need to start again. Here [SAS] is an education space where students redesign and can change their program in the first two years.”

In operational terms, SAS has a “core-plus” curriculum structure for the first two years of study. Everyone is required to take foundational courses like “Great Books,” “Academic Writing,” and “Quantitative Methods,” which are

about two-thirds of the academic study load. Students choose the remaining third of their courses from a slew of electives that vary each year. The offerings have included different aspects of history, art, and religion, as well as “Soviet Visual Propaganda” and “Psychoanalysis and the Pursuit of Happiness.” To complete the four-year bachelor’s degree program, students select a major from the seven offered. They then take advanced courses that align with their major and some electives. Consistent with SAS’s emphasis on academic writing, there are significant assignments, a research essay in Year 3, and a thesis requirement to complete the degree.

With an emphasis on breadth, SAS echoes the image of liberal arts in the Yale reports of 1828 (Timmons, 2007; Yale, 1828), which argued that students need a broad foundation for a robust professional life rather than schooling on a specific task or job. While some faculty we spoke with did not refer directly to SAS in terms of a liberal arts model of curriculum, they did emphasize the ways in which SAS is different from the rest of Russian higher education. An SAS administrator claimed that SAS is “unique in Russia . . . teaching in a different way, students studying in a different way with English language books and teaching . . . with group work.” This view was reiterated both by international faculty with varying levels of exposure to Russian higher education and by administrators deeply imbued in Russian higher education norms and practices. SAS also encourages interdisciplinarity and a cohesive approach to learning. The emphasis on interdisciplinarity and the application of knowledge, rather than recalling discipline-specific knowledge, was often referred to by faculty members and students and is an element common to liberal arts colleges in many other settings. A senior faculty member with a depth of experience in liberal arts commented that SAS’s curriculum and instructional culture gave students “a window into another way of thinking,” which one student summed up as “SAS gives us critical thinking.”

The emphasis on delayed specialization and interdisciplinary studies also shaped perceptions of graduate destinations. Instead of a tight alignment between study and a job or occupation, SAS students, faculty, and administrators all expect most SAS graduates to go immediately to further study, often in foreign or internationally oriented universities. SAS graduates are expected to be fluent in English and familiar with the norms of academic integrity and independent learning that will facilitate their success in graduate education. Few are expected to enter the local job market, although “some students want careers in English-language-denominated professions, like marketing.” An administrator who works closely with SAS students believes that “many of the graduates will go on to study abroad because there are few

places for them in Russia. They will be successful because they know how to multi-task and how to be successful.”

It is hard to judge how things will turn out for SAS graduates, especially given the recent COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine. At the time of this writing, there were only two cohorts of graduates, but it is clear that they have the academic preparation for successful graduate study in Russia and elsewhere. It is also clear that local employers are having difficulty assessing applications from talented young people holding a qualification that is unlike the conventional diplomas held by their peers from the rest of UTMN. They will also be competing in an economy where most of the jobs are organized around specialties.

In sum, the curriculum structure of SAS and the assumption that many of its graduates will go on to further studies reinforce differences between SAS and the prevailing Russian higher education culture. These differences are embedded in and flow from the pursuit of the core principles that led to the founding of SAS as both a site of high-quality education in the liberal arts and sciences and a laboratory for the development and discovery of better ways of organizing learning and teaching in Russian higher education.

The pursuit and application of these principles in the creation of a new institution with a group of actors drawn from different academic cultures and traditions naturally produces tensions and debates. Resolving differences and building a common organizational culture takes time – time that is also needed to address the demand for research and publications that will help lift the profile of SAS and UTMN. These competing views of excellence and what matters in the school are reminders of the complex nature of emerging institutions. These tensions were evident in faculty members’ feelings about the institution. One described SAS as a “bold and wonderful project of opening up Russian education” but also noted that “the push to publish is real and very blunt” and backed by financial incentives. Another, who was one of the first faculty hires, remarked that on the plus side SAS is “unique in Russia . . . teaching in a different way, studying in a different way”; on the negative side are the policies of hiring and firing, a drift to authoritarianism in management, and an emerging lack of trust. Both comments highlight the challenges of building a productive culture.

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## THE INTERACTION OF CORE PRINCIPLES AND A NASCENT INSTITUTIONAL CULTURE

The various actors – members of the SAS community and its host university – have all participated in developing an institutional culture. The faculty are a

central group in the formation of an institution's academic culture, particularly in a liberal arts and sciences college where teaching, research, and student development are central and competing missions. Faculty members are expected to create and operate in a space that values individual responsibility and academic self-governance while they actively do research and publish in highly ranked journals. These demands contrast with those of their nominal peers in the host university who do not face these strictures or the associated penalties for underperformance. As one younger faculty member commented, SAS is a "bold and wonderful project of opening up Russian education . . . [but] the push to publish is real and very blunt. If you don't produce in Q1 and Q2 journals, your salary is reduced by 50 percent . . . Books don't count, popular pieces don't count." On top of this, SAS faculty are also expected to contribute to the creation of a new, still-developing organization. A faculty colleague expressed similar views. He saw SAS as a "can do place" where there was always a "sense of possibility notwithstanding the constraints of federal and local regulations." Yet he also described an organizational culture that was "punishing and pursued perfection . . . at times disorganized but disruptive, in both positive and negative ways."

These sentiments were publicly expressed at length by one of the first faculty members at SAS, who was critical of the "contradictory demands . . . baked into the school design" and "chaotic management [which] creates an unstable and unpredictable work environment" (Savelyeva, 2020, p. 9). These contradictions, Savelyeva (2020) argued, were heightened by the director's management ideology and by the haste with which SAS was established. Some of the faculty and staff we spoke with referred to the lack of experienced senior academics in the SAS community. One faculty member who worked at SAS for some years commented that the director "has inflated expectations about SAS" and overvalues some of its core principles, "which creates other problems," particularly in personnel management when there is large salary premium on performance. These problems include a lot of volatility in the faculty, "lots of turnover – lots of firing and some people have been driven away."

This last comment captures some of the organizational ambiguity that we see in new and emerging institutional cultures. The ambiguity arises as policies and processes are constructed, implemented, tested against core values and principles, then refined and revised. These processes of negotiation can seem endless and foster a sense of uncertainty and instability. They have already occurred more than once in the short life of SAS. People who are new to a role tend to feel these pressures more keenly. As a senior academic

commented, many SAS faculty are recent graduates taking up their first posts and have difficulty transitioning into an “unformed academic culture” where norms are evolving. Furthermore, their colleagues often come from different intellectual traditions, which can increase cultural dissonance when different approaches to seemingly simple practices, like curriculum planning, coexist.

Debating and resolving these competing issues takes time and can be frustrating to people accustomed to certainty and continuity in prior institutional settings. Frustration is heightened when there are strong competing claims for faculty time and when these claims carry great weight. At SAS the need to establish policies and procedures collegially has consumed time that would otherwise be used for research, bearing great consequence for faculty compensation and retention. As one of the first faculty members recruited saw it, “In a new institution there is a lot of service and there has been a lot teaching which is not good for those who want to be and are expected to be research active. The pay structure is 20 percent base salary and 80 percent performance, and this is hard to manage.” Turnover in faculty and iterative development of policies and procedures also shape the student experience. One student interviewee described SAS as an “unstable environment” – a place where both faculty and staff and policies keep changing. They gave the recent example of the attendance policy, sharing that “before you could only miss two classes without proper explanation. Now you can miss more, but [you] need to do make up assignments.”

In addition to changes in processes that impinge on their daily lives, students were also conscious of more nuanced changes in the institutional culture. One student observed how SAS leadership’s views of students had evolved. The initial conception was that SAS was “an institution for the best” that enrolled students who were more able than the UTMN students and who were expected to do better than their peers. The student noted that this has shifted to a more aspirational notion, with leaders communicating “we want you all to be the best” with an emphasis on developing the best rather than admitting the best. Now the prevailing conception is on adding value, not just stockpiling talented high school graduates.

This adjustment to the focus of SAS’s academic mission did not completely resolve existing debate on elitism in SAS’s framing of its students. One faculty member who has been with SAS since its first intake of students is still conflicted about the elitist emphasis. He expressed some unease about SAS’s interest in producing “great students” as opposed to providing opportunities to all, especially given the low completion rate for SAS’s first cohort (around 30 percent) and concerns about student progress. A faculty member

wondered if SAS's "very competitive spartan environment" can offer a student "who is struggling in year one [the space or support] . . . to produce a capstone paper in year three?" Further adjustments and refinements are to be expected as the institutional culture accommodates new perspectives as others join the academic community.

Changes in the composition of the faculty will also affect interactions between SAS and its local and national environments. One of the drivers of policy adjustments is the entropic force of the immediate environment, which encourages new ideas to conform to prevailing practices. The reality is that SAS is not completely a "greenfield" site; it is surrounded by an institution where the academic culture is well codified and uniform, with centralized decision-making and top-down administration. As a regional university in the federal system, Tyumen University (UTMN) operates within a robust regulatory framework of fiscal controls and conforms with the standards and procedures required to be licensed and accredited. Like most public universities in Russia, UTMN's administrative culture is shaped by its shared national history. While many things have changed since the Soviet era, Kuraev (2016) noted that "Sovietism in Russian academia dies hard" and "the organizational principles of uniformity, top-down administration and one-man management [have] persisted" (p. 190). Faculty "show little interest in university affairs outside the classroom," and the faculty governance structures that exist have "little influence" (Eklof, 2005, p. 14). The situation in SAS is more nuanced. The first faculty members were directly involved in establishing policies and norms of behavior for the new organization. The absence of departments or academic divisions allowed interested faculty to engage directly in the initial operations of the school. As the organization grew and SAS began to interact with UTMN and cultural and governmental agencies in the city, formal roles and structures began to develop, and faculty tended to feel less involved. One senior faculty member commented that by the fifth year of operation it was clear that "SAS needs a better, more measured governance approach – there is a problem of power verticals" and "it is still struggling with the Russian bureaucracy and complexity."

While enjoying considerable independence, SAS still operates with some eye towards the constraints of its host institution. For example, while the SAS Teaching Council formulates its own regulations, these must be "approved by the rector and are subject to mandatory coordination with UTMN subdivisions" (SAS, 2019, n.p.). These processes of approval and consultation can be benign, with mutual adjustments to resolve differences, or they can be inflexible and contested. Some of our interviewees were very candid about

the complexity of the relationship between the two entities. Many of the policies and procedures adopted by SAS required some changes in the regulatory framework. The leadership of the rector, who was instrumental in creating SAS, was helpful even after he left to take up the post of education minister for the Russian federal government. But even with strong support from the top, interactions between SAS and its host were complex. One obvious factor is that SAS is an English-speaking environment, and UTMN's administration and governance processes operate almost exclusively in Russian. The presence of experienced bilingual administrators in SAS smoothed connections between the two entities. They were aided by the direct engagement of the head of UTMN's strategic projects unit, which also helped SAS to be accommodated in the university's operating systems. Yet SAS is a small unit, and at times its wants are perceived as irritants. As one SAS administrator observed, "they all hate us because every day we want something new. New something, new rules, new standards, new culture, new faculties. But they copy." Commenting on this imitative behavior, a senior manager said that UTMN has adopted a curricular pattern similar to SAS – a two-year plus two-year model; and other universities "have decided to experiment with individualization."

Some of the complexity in the relationship comes from the differences in scale. The student body and budget of SAS are not even one-tenth those of UTMN. And some of the complexity comes from differences in academic traditions. But in the view of a very senior leader, a lot of the complexity comes from the reluctance of individuals to change:

The introduction of something new is always negatively perceived by the majority for many reasons, due to some patterns, due to one's habits, due to one's not knowing any different, due to one's not wishing to change and to come out of the one's comfort zone, well, a number of reasons can be named as to why a person does not want to change something. And so, the staff and frequently, respectively, its resistance, its unreadiness, even its incapability of [accepting] these changes are probably the key, the most complicated moment that has been taking place.

The adoption of the two-year core curriculum and the individual education pathways for students at UTMN are indicators of some success in transforming the prevailing academic culture in Russia's public universities. This culture was described by one leading Russian administrator both as "entirely different" in how it approached research and "academic protocols" and as a product of "large and longstanding cultural isolation" where the knowledge

base was always “a little behind.” Communication between actors from the two cultures was at times difficult.

The animus and personal costs of the exchanges wear on SAS faculty and staff. Some have left; others worry that their professional integrity will be compromised if the personnel policies continue to be turbulent and ill-formed. One senior scholar discussed the challenges of faculty recruitment, expressing concern about the volatility in processes for reviewing performance and determining total compensation for individuals. The scholar observed, “I ethically cannot stay somewhere that has some of the issues that we’ve had with faculty . . . And I just don’t feel like I can be encouraging people to come here and be assisting in recruiting and interviewing and managing people unless we are really going to commit to helping people be successful in this environment.” Other senior faculty members looking for wider systemic changes within the Russian higher education system think that the costs are worth the return.

Leaders of UTMN also took a positive view of the impact of SAS on the university as an entity and on the region. UTMN benefited from the innovations and exemplars of good practice that came from faculty and administrators who drew on their international experience to develop new policies and processes. SAS was “a subdivision, young and new which the university had never had.” Its staff brought “an experience of *other* views upon the educational space” through which the management of UTMN became “acquainted . . . with another reality that had always surrounded us . . . and helped us develop” the new academic structure. SAS also furthered UTMN’s engagement with the region, its enterprises, and its government. This was partly because of its physical presence as an accessible space for learning and community events in the center of the city. But it was more than the “development of an urban space.” A senior leader of UTMN commented that SAS helped the university “become a driver for the development of the region and formulate, together with the province . . . an agenda for the regional development including in the field of human asset development.”

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## CONCLUSION

SAS is a young institution pursuing an ambitious goal. Its quest is organized around a few key principles; this is one of its strengths. Focusing on these core ideas encourages its leaders and central actors to concentrate their efforts and energies on some aspects of the institution to the possible



detriment of others. Individuals may rightly feel that their wishes and needs are disregarded.

Like many quests, the development of SAS is a process with committed, energetic leaders and a vision with a clear end goal, but a lot less clarity regarding the path to reach that end. The vision attracts others to join in the effort, but the seemingly relentless tasks of refining and redefining policies and processes have pushed some away and demoralized others. This, and the emphasis on research publication, has led to faculty turnover, which marked the first years of SAS's operations. The pandemic and then the war in Ukraine have also reshaped the SAS faculty profile. Some have continued teaching and supervision activities to enable students to complete their final year of study but do not engage in recruiting or "institution building." While the SAS faculty continues to be predominately one with international experiences, some recent recruits have decided not to relocate to Russia and have declined their appointments.

While SAS has served as a model for a new academic structure and a policy of delayed specialization for UTMN as a whole, it is too early to judge the success of the SAS innovation. But the case is very helpful in illustrating the costs and complexity of negotiating and building an academic culture with values that go against the grain of the larger institutional, regional, and national cultural contexts. As one of the founding faculty members commented as he prepared to leave SAS after seeing the first cohort through to graduation, there were pluses and minuses in the experience, "yet I learned a lot and at the end of the day it is positive."