



"The only source of the knowledge is experience"

Albert Einstein

Dear colleagues,

Here comes the second issue of the "HSE Look". For us it's probably more important than the first one, as now we are to meet expectations created earlier. We promised to be helpful, share what our fellow researchers experienced at HSE and tell about internal processes aimed at boosting the international research.

I dare add to Einstein's famous quote that other people's experience might also be of great help. That's why we start to publish a series of interviews with our colleagues, who were internationally recruited and have been working at HSE for some time already. The first person we have talked to is Valentina Kuskova, a Research Fellow in the Center for Advanced Studies and an Associate Professor at the Faculty of Management. Valentina kindly told us about her students, research, peculiarities of living in Moscow and working at HSE.

We are getting back to the short-term sabbaticals described in the previous issue. This time we have the infoscheme for your perusal. It was designed to make the process of application simple and easy.

Having had the experience of research and teaching in the universities outside Russia, no doubt that you are familiar with the teaching assistant programs of different kinds. HSE is no exception to the rest of the world academia, and we'll explain how the TA program works at HSE, how to apply and what to expect.

So that's the second issue, which means that we are one issue more experienced than we had been before. That's one small step forward on, but it counts if it's done in the right direction. So do please let us know if it's the case <http://iai.hse.ru/button> we need your opinion!

Kind regards,

Yulia Grinkevich

Director for International Academic Integration

"Without data you are just another person with an opinion"

Valentina Kuskova is a Research Fellow in the Center for Advanced Studies and an Associate Professor at the Faculty of Management. Valentina joined the Higher School of Economics in 2011, she repatriated from the United States, where she spent 16 years, 12 out of which she devoted to research and teaching. She kindly agreed to share her experience, opinion and plans with us.

Valentina, why did you choose the Higher School of Economics?

I came to the Higher School of Economics as a part of the international recruiting efforts of the Center for Advanced Studies two years ago. I had an uneasy choice of several Universities before I came here, one of them was in China, another one was the University of Texas in the States, and one was the Higher School of Economics. In the end, I was choosing between Texas and the Higher School of Economics, and what the choice came down to was not money, it felt right. My advisors, people who were older and wiser than me, who know me, unanimously told me to go to Moscow. They said that at a growing school, aspiring to get to an internationally recognized level, where I will get lots of research support, I will have more opportunities and an almost untapped potential from the research standpoint. And they were right. When I came to Moscow for an interview I felt like it was my place – the people I've met, the students I've looked at, the enthusiasm that I've encountered coming from everyone, I think that influenced my decision most of all.

It has been two years since you started working at the Higher School of Economics. What have you achieved over these years?

I collect data, a process that takes time and effort and isn't immediately noticeable. What sets HSE apart from other universities is that there is a lot of research support.

Not only was I able to get money to collect data, but I was able to get contacts. When I needed a large enterprise with about two thousand people to research at, the School connected me with “Crystal” manufacturing facility, which works with diamonds. They gladly let me come and do my research with them. This is not something I could accomplish in the States, if I needed to do so. It would have been up to me to find the contacts. Same happened with a military base, where I was able to collect data sets in a longitudinal context that I could have only dreamed about! Now my students are working with the freshest data sets, and we are hoping to have 6-7 publications coming out next year. I try to involve students as much as possible in my research. They collect the data, enter it into spreadsheets and do preliminary analysis. I always back them up, but I let them go into it and see what they can find out on their own. In fact, one of my students, Natalia Kulagina, found something that I did not expect to find! I had a different hypothesis on the matter we researched, but it was her finding and that was very exciting.

Another student, Mikhail Volkov, has had his work accepted to be presented first at a division-level, and then a world-level conference of the Academy of International Business (AIB), that’s about as high as it gets in the field of international business. He is presenting his work at the AIB annual meeting in Istanbul in July. When he presented his work in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, I actually asked to listen in through Skype! He was doing so well, he spoke well; he presented Russia and HSE well. I was sitting there more proud than his mother. I am happier about their success than my own, I feel like they are my children.

How is Russia different from the United States in terms of research?

The reason social science research works so well in Russia is because the people here are not oversurveyed. They understand research in math, physics, economics, but they do not know what research in social sciences is about. Social research hasn’t been done extensively in Russia or the Soviet Union. Hence, there is natural curiosity and a high level of care in Russian people. There is a high potential for cross-cultural research. Working at the Higher School of Economics, and having access to certain contacts and companies, gives me the opportunity to compare the results with the existing data sets from other countries. Comparative publications are exactly what research communities are lacking.

There is a stigma that the Russians are afraid to answer questions. Actually, it is much simpler than people think. They will answer questions if they are asked right. If right contact is made, people grow very curious and willing to provide the information.

You spoke about research. What about teaching?

Teaching in Russia is very different from teaching in the United States. I’ve taught there for 12 years, and what I’ve learned is to be more of an entertainer than an educator. Students there are spoiled; they are exposed to numerous teaching techniques and come to class to be entertained. Here students are not used to anything novel or exciting. They come to get knowledge, not necessarily the degree or the diploma. I work with them in an interactive manner and help them understand why things happen, not just give them information to “take and swallow”. In these 2 years, I believe, I’ve gone through a bigger growth process as an educator than I have during 12 years in the United States. The most rewarding experience of teaching is seeing them get excited about something as boring as statistics. If they can get excited about statistics, they can get excited about anything.

Could you list advantages and disadvantages of working at Higher School of Economics?

From the work perspective the pluses are a lot of freedom and flexibility, a practically untapped research field, brilliant students (some of the master’s degree dissertations by far surpass PhD dissertations I’ve seen abroad), good academic and administrative support and the fact that even though a very high hierarchy exists, it is almost erased in the Higher School of Economics. In my two years here I’ve been to the Dean’s, the Vice Rector’s and the Rector’s office and was allowed in at every level, because people are interested in bringing foreign faculty to the Higher School of Economics. In twelve years in the USA I’ve never been to the Dean’s office.

From the personal perspective – I can easily travel and there is a lot of support in that regard. Most of the positive things are intangible; I cannot measure them using any existing scales. This is like the concept of happiness – at the level of emotions. If I were to describe myself as happy or unhappy on a scale of 1 to 10, I’d say, I’m about a 9... because I’m still getting used to the metro.

As to the minuses, I'd say that there are two sides to a coin. Liberty and flexibility that open potential for research on the one hand, may be a hindrance to people who can't structure their work on the other hand. Having smart students, who challenge you and ask questions – that could be a hindrance. Students are very used to pushing the red button on the website and complain.

Have you noticed any changes in the Higher School of Economics since the day you first came?

Absolutely! The adjustment process for the people getting hired now has become much simpler. There is a lot of support now. At each faculty there is a coordinator - a dedicated person who works with PhD holders. The medical insurance has improved. Many processes, which I had difficulties with originally, such as getting business trip approvals, have been simplified. A number of bylaws have been passed, such as the short-term sabbaticals program, which is an excellent benefit – practically, a paid month off to research. We didn't use to have that. The HSE Look is also a novelty – a window to the outside world. A lot of efforts have been made, and they are giving tangible results.

Is there anything you would improve?

The University operates in a set of rules created by the country in which it operates. There may be things that are not working in the best way possible, but they are the product of the legislature, which is beyond the University control. For example, foreigners must reside in the country for a certain amount of days, otherwise they may lose their residence status. It would be nice to be flexible and travel all you want, but it is the same rule as in the United States, where you can lose your status if you do not live there long enough during the year. Every time I think of a drawback, I realize that it is already being worked on. We will get there!

How do you see yourself in 5 years from now?

The university is very committed to getting itself to the internationally recognized level. I think I can help, because I know how things work here and in the United States. I can help bridge the gap. At the Higher School of Economics when I say the sky is the limit I am not exaggerating, because when I have ideas about how to do things, those ideas are listened to.

That is beyond any teaching, researching, developing students and helping them get onto an internationally recognized publication and presentation level. In five years I think I will be able to do some things of which I can be proud looking back.

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Teaching Assistants

In 2009 the Higher School of Economics first launched the program of the Teaching Assistants contest. Though the successful practice is adopted from foreign universities, the program in HSE has a very important distinction from universities outside Russia – the TAs cannot carry out teaching activities on their own, they can participate in conducting a lesson, but exclusively under his/her mentor's supervision (except scientific and research seminars at the master's course – these may not be conducted even in the teacher's presence).

The practice has proven to be very useful and effective over the 4 years it exists. A lot of members of the faculty staff prolong their requests for a TA from year to year. In 2013 the contest for disciplines commencing in September has started on May 17, and applications for participation are accepted up till, but not including June 15.

At the moment the procedure described below is true for Moscow only. In satellite campuses TAs are taken on according to their own set procedures and are issued co-funding for the purposes.

Who is entitled to place a request for taking part in the TA contest?

All full-time or half-time members of the faculty staff. The rating of the discipline that the TA is planned to be involved in must be at least 3,5. If a professor has designed a course of their own and it is being taught for the first time, he/she cannot take part in the contest, as the new discipline needs at least 1 year to establish.

Who can be chosen as a TA?

The member of the faculty can make a proposal to any student or postgraduate he or she considers deserving. The choice of the person is individual. If you do not have a candidate, you can still take part in the contest and select a person after your application has been approved, but before the beginning of the course. The requirements for the candidate are that they must have at least an 8 on a ten-point grading scale in the discipline they are being taken on for or have a positive recommendation from the subdepartment they study at. Please mind the fact that those students, who are in their last BA year will graduate in the summer and no longer be students. The contract with such people can be signed only after the order of their enrolment to a master's course or postgraduate studentship is issued.

What is the procedure of applying?

This year the process of applying has been simplified and automated.

If you are applying for the 1st time:

- Enter your personal account on the portal, you will see the tab "apply".

- Fill in the questionnaire.
- Press the button "send for approval". If you conduct seminars on a discipline you will need the approval of the lecturer of that subject. If you are the lecturer – the application will come back to you for approving.
- After that is settled, the application is sent to the head of the subdepartment, who also needs to vise it.

At both approval stages there are three possible outcomes: approved, declined and returned for enhancement (in this case there will be comments of the person returning it). The final decision is made by the Committee of the Education Innovations Fund.

If you apply for prolonging a contract with the TA, mind that there are cases when your request may be extended automatically. These cases are: if you have been awarded "best teacher of the year" or if the rating of your discipline is 4. If neither – you apply for the contest according to the standard procedure described above.

The application can also be initiated as a group (of those professors who conduct classes in the same discipline). In that case do attach an agreement of distributing the work load of the TA signed by all of the participants.

The candidate is signed a contract with on completion of the last stage.

Who may be addressed for help?

Part of this process is in Russian. Your coordinators will be glad to help you with filling out your application and answering your questions. You are also welcome to contact Oxana Chernenko, the Executive Director of the program, directly at ochernenko@hse.ru.

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