

UCML Executive Committee

Friday 26 April 2019

12.30 – 16.00

Room C60b/c, InfoLab21
School of Computing & Communications
Lancaster University, LA1 4WA



Item 10i – Slavonic & East European studies

1. State of the Field in Higher Education

In my previous report, I mentioned that I planned to conduct an audit of the state of the field for SEE Languages in Higher Education (HE). I surveyed representatives of 15 HE departments nationwide where Russian and other Slavonic/East European languages are taught and received replies from 12.

During the survey, I asked three questions. I have summarized the responses below:

1) How do your admissions numbers for Russian in Autumn 2018 compare to previous years? Are numbers rising, falling, or broadly stable?

Most representatives reported that their numbers were stable overall. Several noted that their number of post-A Level students had fallen, but this was compensated for by an increase in ab initio students. Some noted a trend away from single honours Russian towards a combination of two or three languages, as well as a preference for joint degrees with subjects such as History and Politics.

Many representatives noted that programmes in SEE languages other than Russian are increasingly marginalized. Often such programmes are not full degree programmes but housed in language centres. Several expressed fears about whether the institutions would continue to make provision for teaching in these languages.

2) To what extent, if any, has the increase in diplomatic tensions between the UK and Russia affected your students and your programme?

Most representatives commented that Russia's higher profile in world affairs has led to an increase in student interest and recruitment, even when most of the press coverage around Russia is negative. Some representatives noted that students are increasingly motivated by political, historical, and social questions to study Russian, rather than literature and culture. A couple of representatives suggested that their students pursued Russian out of a desire to delve beyond the picture presented in the media, which can be reductive.

Several representatives mentioned that planning for the Year Abroad in Russia has been made more challenging. Visa regulations have been made more stringent for students travelling to Russia. The introduction of the 'anti-gay' laws in Russia in 2013 has meant that many LGBT+ students feel uncomfortable travelling to Russia, although many who do choose to travel find a more welcoming atmosphere than they had anticipated. In some cases, students have chosen to spend time in other Russian-speaking environments (e.g. the Baltic States).

3) What, in your view, is the single most pressing concern facing Russian and East European studies in UK higher education at the moment?

Answers to this question were varied. However, the majority of representatives focused on funding challenges in different ways. Some lamented the fact that the increased strategic interest in Russia and East Europe, mentioned in Q. 2, had not translated into any additional funding for teaching or research in the area. Others noted a mismatch between the drive towards marketization in HE, which smaller programmes under pressure, and the government's ambition to build expertise on Russia and Eastern Europe. One suggested that ring-fenced funding should be introduced for strategically important languages that are underfunded.

Several mentioned specific cuts to their programmes or non-replacement of academic staff. Some pointed out that the reduction in staff members had a palpable effect on the diversity of research and teaching within departments, and that it was especially difficult for departments to meet the drive towards interdisciplinarity when staff are under so much pressure. Others expressed the view that the smaller SEE languages (everything other than Russian) were increasingly vulnerable and asked whether and how UCML might specifically support these smaller languages.

Other representatives pointed out that the effects of the current political climate on research, as obtaining the correct visa has become more difficult and access to archives has not necessarily improved.