

UCML Executive Committee meeting, Friday 11 November 2022

Report on Slavonic and East European Studies

Handover of roles

I took up the post of Slavonic & East European (S&EE) representative in September. I am grateful to my predecessor, Dr Connor Doak, for his detailed induction to this role.

Year Abroad

Organizing Year Abroad options for students of Russian has been the most pressing challenge for Slavonic & East European departments because of the effects of the war in Ukraine. However, as the UCML Year Abroad group has identified, there is also a matter which affects the Year Abroad for students of all languages: that of visa support.

Most undergraduates studying more than one language as part of their course split the Year Abroad between two countries. Following Brexit, a visa is now needed for stays of over 90 days in EU countries. The difficulties of obtaining visas for two countries has proved to be a major obstacle. Only a handful of universities have provided additional support to students and Year Abroad co-ordinators; in most others, revisions to the Year Abroad regulations are being considered. These range from shortening the residency requirement for each semester to removing the requirement to spend the year in more than one country (for students studying more than one language).

Some of these changes will have serious repercussions for students' linguistic and cultural proficiency, which in turn will mean that the level of language required for final-year modules will have to be reduced: students will be less able to engage with material in the original language. The benefits of prolonged exposure to more than one culture – so attractive to employers – will be reduced.

Currently, Modern Languages graduates are typically expected to achieve at least CEFR Level C1 in the major language or languages in their course. If that benchmark has to be lowered to CEFR level B2 for one or more languages, then Modern Languages becomes much less attractive as a degree subject: level B2 is the expected standard for an A-level with a C grade or above.

Slavonic and East European languages stand to be particularly affected by this change, as the vast majority of students study the languages *ab initio*: for them, study on the Year Abroad is essential to attain degree-level linguistic proficiency. If changes to Year Abroad regulations lead students to take fewer languages in their degree course, the continued offer of less commonly taught languages may well be in jeopardy. Institutional support for students' visa applications is therefore vital.

Following the invasion of Ukraine in February, the Foreign Office advised British citizens against all but essential travel to Russia. Consequently, most universities recalled students on their Year Abroad; shortly thereafter, travel insurance policies issued by Western insurers became invalid. Tutors in Russian departments and Year Abroad support staff helped students plan their journeys back to the UK and provided pastoral support at this uncertain time. This unexpected addition to colleagues' workloads was offset by informal online discussions, which were a vital source of practical advice and mutual support. Most universities provided additional financial aid to students.

After payments from the West to Russia ceased to be possible, Russian course providers could no longer be paid to provide online tuition as they had during the travel bans in the Covid pandemic. It was therefore no longer possible to maintain active links with partners in Russia, and alternative courses had to be sought or set up in other countries with Russian-speaking communities. Dr James Illingworth (University of Cardiff) and the UCML Year Abroad group convened a meeting for Russian and Ukrainian Year Abroad tutors to discuss future arrangements. This was a very productive forum in which to exchange information, experiences and concerns after a stressful few weeks.

Russian Language Undergraduate Studies (RLUS), which has organized courses in various Russian cities since the 1980s, was able to establish a course in Tallinn for part of the Spring Semester; a Summer School followed. Thanks to the considerable initiative and hard work of Dr Lynne Attwood (University of Manchester) and Robert Jensky (Language Link, Tallinn), it has been possible to run courses in Astana as well as Tallinn in both semesters this year. Students from several universities have enrolled on these courses; initial reports show that, apart from a few teething problems, the courses and accommodation arrangements are working out well, and it is therefore likely that they will run in future years.

Apart from the RLUS courses, students have been attending course in other cities in the Baltic, Caucasian and Central Asian countries – Riga, Daugavpils, Tbilisi, Almaty and Bishkek. A summer course in Almaty was successful in whetting the appetites of several students to return for their Year Abroad.

The virtual resources some universities set up as partial compensation for the lost Spring Semester in Russia have been retained and in some cases expanded with virtual Russian exchanges and speaking clubs.

There have been some concerns about funding for these courses, some of which are more expensive than the ones in Russia. In some cases, universities have covered the cost, and tutors are anxious that this should continue, as Turing funding alone is not sufficient to cover them.

I regret to report that Dr Roy Bivon, formerly of the University of East Anglia and Operations Consultant for RLUS from 1998 to 2021, died on 25 September. His knowledge, experience and dry humour are much missed at RLUS meetings and, I am sure, more widely.

Research

British academics who were in Russia at the end of February were required to leave the country by their universities for similar reasons to the students on the Year Abroad. Since then, travel to Russia for fieldwork or research has been impossible, which has had a major effect on the research plans of colleagues in Russian studies. As a quick end to the war and the restoration of normal diplomatic relations between the UK and Russia seem unlikely, individual Russianists and their departments are naturally concerned for the short- to medium-term prospects of research in Russian and Ukrainian studies. As a minimum, these circumstances must be taken into account when considering such things as REF submissions or cases for promotion.

The British Association of Slavonic and East European Studies (BASEES) Executive Committee discussed the feasibility and ethics of asking researchers in Russia or Ukraine to carry out archival work on behalf of scholars in the West. It was agreed that asking a Russian or Ukrainian scholar to carry out work deemed to be unsafe for a British scholar potentially posed ethical problems; additionally, the official position of many Russian academic institutions as set out in the Rectors' letter of 4 March would make work in any of their archives similarly problematic.

Recruitment of postgraduate students and postdoctoral academics is now more difficult for similar reasons: many projects in Russian and Ukrainian studies are now complicated, if not impossible.

SSEES's research committee and library are also addressing the russocentrism of research groups, seminar series and library collections.

Curriculum changes

Many universities which offer S&EE languages are preparing or have introduced changes to their curricula. Some changes were under way as part of wider decolonization and diversification initiatives, but the current war in Ukraine has given them renewed impetus. Departments are now exploring ways to teach Russian culture in its plurality rather than as a single tradition belonging to Russia. The transnational and global contexts of particular aspects of Russian culture, critiques of Russian colonialism in cultural artefacts and critical examination of ideas of Russian exceptionalism, both in the materials used and in the approaches to teaching used, are all now under discussion or being included in modules on Russian culture. Modules in several departments now include material from Ukraine and countries of the Caucasus and Central Asia, both to challenge Russocentric narratives as well as to help prepare students travelling to Georgia, Kazakhstan or Kyrgyzstan during the Year Abroad. Glasgow and SSEES have involved students in this work. SSEES is undertaking a comprehensive review of its courses and modules, drawing on the transnational linguistics modules currently offered in its East European Studies section. There have been some moves to offer courses in Ukrainian language, albeit not at degree level, in Glasgow and Sheffield. Both institutions aim to appoint displaced Ukrainian scholars to fixed-term posts. BASEES has also set up a working group to explore ways of supporting Ukrainian colleagues. I will report more fully on these efforts to future meetings.

Admissions

Only one university reported a significant drop in first-year enrolment for Russian. All others stated that student numbers remained normal, with any fluctuations being attributable to other institutional factors. Where other S&EE languages are offered, numbers remain consistent; the School of Slavonic and East European Studies at UCL (SSEES) is working with the UCL admissions office to enhance the promotion of S&EE languages other than Russian. Numbers for Czech remain steady at Bristol and Sheffield; Nottingham continues to offer modules in Serbian/Croatian language and culture.

Some colleagues remain concerned about the longer-term outlook for admissions; at the start of this academic year, some US institutions reported large falls in numbers of students taking Russian; see [this initial report](#).

New appointments

In a climate in which Modern Languages departments are under pressure, it is heartening to record some new appointments. Two new Russian language tutors, Olga Kenton and Maria Wald, have been appointed at the University of Birmingham. At the University of Glasgow, the departure of Dr

Andrea Gullotta, lecturer in Russian, has been followed by the appointment of Dr Nick Mayhew. Queen Mary University of London is in the process of appointing a new lecturer in Russian.

Research grants

Similarly, there have been some noteworthy successes in Russian studies spite of the difficult field in which this sub-field now operates.

Dr Isobel Palmer (University of Birmingham) has recently been awarded a BA/Leverhulme Small Grant for a project titled 'Poetry in Public: The Social Life of Russian Verse 1900-1991'. This grant (September 2022 - September 2024) will fund initial research into practices of poetry performance in Russia and the Soviet Union in a variety of state-sanctioned and unofficial settings. The project considers the role of poetry performance in the formation of public(s) at critical moments in Russian and Soviet history.

Dr Vita Kogan (SSEES) has been awarded a Research Priorities Grant from the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL), along with Professor Andrea Revesz from the Institute of Education, for their project 'The Effect of Task Authenticity on Second Language Writing Process and Product.'

Natalya Parker (SSEES) has been nominated for an ATSEEL book prize in the Linguistics and Language Pedagogy category for *Russian in Plain English. A Very Basic Russian Starter for Complete Beginners* (Routledge, 2020).

Events

The University of Central Lancashire's Vladimir Vysotsky Centre for Russian Studies continues with its annual programme of events and activities. There is a new student-led Russian Academic Society at the University of Leeds, where further extracurricular activities are planned.

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