

# Pitfalls of Student Selection in Leadership Training in Russia

Mark Harris

In the 1990s pastoral training ministries were springing up all over the former Soviet Union. The high-speed installation of the various modes of training had a feel of urgency promoted by at least the following factors.

1. There was a rush to meet the demands of the many new churches that were being started, as well as the needs in an area where formal training had been denied for many years.
2. Many had the fear that “time is short” due to the potential for renewed persecution, closed borders, or a fading in Western giving.
3. Western churches, denominations and para-church organizations had a tendency to desire independent training programs, and the resulting lack of partnering caused a great deal of duplication as schools proliferated.

Unfortunately, the rapid response to the needs (real and perceived) was accompanied by a lack of missiological reflection. Part of the reason for this was that the prime movers were

*Mark J. Harris, D.Miss. has recently joined the staff of USCWM in the strategy department. He and his family spent almost nine years in Russia and a year in England, involved in evangelism, pastor training, research, and missionary training development. The results of his research among Russian young people can be found through [www.markharris.us](http://www.markharris.us)  
E-mail: [mark.harris@uscwm.org](mailto:mark.harris@uscwm.org)*



often Western leaders who understood theology and training from a Western perspective only. These leaders were often backed by Western businessmen who had very little appreciation for foreign culture, and tended to have a “franchise mental-

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ity” as they established schools and programs.

God is gracious, and the lack of wisdom on the part of the Western workers did not prevent their loving and zealous intentions from being at least partially realized. Many young Russians were exposed to much good biblical teaching. However, many of these programs fell short of fulfilling their mission to train leaders for a new generation of Russian churches. Several specific aspects of their strategies and methods were at fault, but here we’ll focus on deficiencies in student selection.

Out of my reading, experience and interviews in Russia, I offer the following partial list of the wrong kinds of students that often completed Western training programs without being able to advance the cause for which the program was created. There were students who fit in several of these categories, and the categories are not mutually exclusive.

1. **The neophytes**—In many leadership training programs were found new believers who were in need of basic spiritual formation. They had very little

grounding in their faith, little or no church experience, and had often entered training for the purpose of receiving initial discipling.

2. **The inexperienced**—Other students may have been believers for some time, but had never been involved in ministry. The younger of these also lacked in critical life experience (family, work, etc.). Those lacking experience were unable to apply much of what they were learning—especially those topics related to practical ministry.
3. **The unqualified**—Many of those who had time and experience on their side were not qualified for leadership for other reasons (I Tim. 3:1-13). Again, basic spiritual formation or correction was their main need.
4. **The purposeless**—Other students were studying with no particular intention or desire for ministry, but were rather just seizing the opportunity to get some spiritual

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growth or answers to some of their questions. Some of these simply had nothing better to do, and felt that they “might as well study.”

5. **The unsent**—This was a common problem among the well-established Russian churches. Young men from these churches would get training, but then return to their churches to find no openings for leadership. Further, they aroused suspicion

from church elders about the nature their training (due to important theological differences between the churches and the schools). Existing leaders often felt threatened by the fact that the graduates had much more formal training than they had, and the rift was made worse by the common attitude of those trained that they now “knew better” than the existing leadership.

6. **The professional academics**—Students often had career motives at variance with the goals of the training program. It was common to find students who preferred teaching to pastoring. Many wanted to study simply so that they could teach in the same institution.
7. **The status seekers**—Existing church leaders often ended up in training programs, but many of these also had ulterior motives. As men who had been denied training for many years in the Soviet system, they were often more interested in the prestige of a diploma or certificate than they were in the internalization of the principles they were being taught.
8. **The linguists**—In the early 1990s the ability to speak English was a prized skill in Russia. Many young Russians crowded around Americans for this purpose, and some of these saw the training programs as the best opportunity to gain English fluency. A percentage of these were believers, but were looking to become translators rather than spiritual leaders.
9. **The hirelings**—One of the saddest situations was the presence of young people with few job opportunities in Russia who jumped at the chance to have the paid “job” of studying the Bible (since many schools paid stipends). Others were looking at the program as a stepping stone to further study or work in the West (from which they had no intention to return to Russia). Most of the new churches and their connected organizations had paid staff

positions, and students were often attracted to the opportunity for a job that was better than other options they had.

Why did the institutions accept such students? Again here is a partial list of reasons.

1. Most of those who had the maturity, experience and qualifications for church leadership were simply not available for the programs. They had families and jobs, and were not available for the daytime and/or residential programs that were being offered.
2. Young people were more open and pliable to accept new teaching, and thus were attracted to programs. Existing leaders often didn't trust Western teaching, and were in some instances reluctant to study even if available.
3. The proliferation of schools by non-partnering organizations led to an unhealthy competition to attract students, with the result that maturity and qualifications became thinner among the ranks of those available to study.
4. Organizations that were pouring money into Russia (often from Korea as well as from the West) needed students to justify their programs, and often everyone who was available was accepted into the program.

The presence of the wrong students in these programs led to a loss of potential in the training programs. Again, there were many high-quality students who completed these programs and are now committed to their ministries. But other qualified students were discouraged about their programs because of the presence of students who were ungifted or immature. We should not underestimate the motivational effect of being among a group of others who are qualified and committed to the Lord, and the demotivating effect of the opposite.

Graduates of any training program will not be successful in minis-

try unless they have credibility among those to whom they would minister. Western trainers often took for granted that simply graduating from their program was going to bring to the students automatic acceptance,

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and in Russia this was often far from the reality.

While too often training programs have led to much wasted time with the wrong students, there are a growing number of newer programs that are focused on the practical mentoring of adult leaders sent by their churches. They first worked slowly and carefully to establish solid relationships with the churches, built trust by their words and deeds, and are now having fruitful ministry. Zealous amateurs will often rush ahead of those studying to apply sound missiology to a new situation, but the latter group proves its value in the lasting fruit of wise cross-cultural ministry. 🌐

