

University professors and students: specifics of interaction at the market of educational services

Profesores universitarios y estudiantes: aspectos específicos de la interacción en el mercado de los servicios educativos.

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Contents

1. Introduction

2. Methods

3. Results

4. Discussion

5. Conclusion

Bibliographic references

ABSTRACT:

The article addresses the dynamics of the position of professors and students in Russian universities in the time of transition from top-down system to market relations. We show that many qualitative shifts in the system of relations between professors and students reflect the general tendencies in the development of higher education. We have established that the increased load and stricter requirements towards the level and quality of research and pedagogic activity significantly complicate the everyday work of a professor by decreasing the opportunities of "live" interaction with students. Based on the analysis of the sociological surveys results, we have revealed students' attitude towards university professors as the subjects of the educational services market. The process of development of new adaptive strategies of the students that are aimed solely at "consumer" attitude towards the professors has been described. The factors that prevent establishing a new model of partnership interaction between university students and professors, which would be adequate for the current social-economic conditions, have been defined.

Keywords: higher education, university professors, university students, market of educational services, interaction of professors and students

RESUMEN:

El artículo aborda la dinámica de la posición de los profesores y estudiantes en las universidades rusas en el momento de la transición del sistema de arriba hacia abajo a las relaciones de mercado. Mostramos que muchos cambios cualitativos en el sistema de relaciones entre profesores y estudiantes reflejan las tendencias generales en el desarrollo de la educación superior. Hemos establecido que la mayor carga y los requisitos más estrictos hacia el nivel y la calidad de la investigación y la actividad pedagógica complican significativamente el trabajo diario de un profesor al disminuir las oportunidades de interacción "en vivo" con los estudiantes. Sobre la base del análisis de los resultados de las encuestas sociológicas, hemos revelado la actitud de los estudiantes hacia los profesores universitarios como sujetos del mercado de servicios educativos. Se ha descrito el proceso de desarrollo de nuevas estrategias de adaptación de los estudiantes que están dirigidas únicamente a la actitud del "consumidor" hacia los profesores. Se han definido los factores que impiden establecer un nuevo modelo de interacción de asociación entre estudiantes universitarios y profesores, que sería adecuado para las condiciones socioeconómicas actuales.

Palabras clave: educación superior, profesores universitarios, estudiantes universitarios, mercado de servicios educativos, interacción de profesores y estudiantes.

1. Introduction

The system of Russian higher education is currently experiencing transformations. Relevant issues of

higher-education reforms are extensively discussed not only by the representatives of the education community, but also by those who are not directly involved in education but are genuinely concerned about the fate of Russian universities. Public attention is attracted by various problems of interaction between university professors and students. Obviously, it is impossible to establish a new model of Russian higher education without active partnership interaction between those two important sides of the educational process.

Currently, the position of a university professor is characterized by a clear controversy: on the one hand, in the conditions of economic modernization, university professors strengthen their position as a social-professional unity responsible for developing human capital; on the other hand, if one evaluates the actual level and quality of life, the professors are shifted to rather low-status groups. The complexity of professors' position is increased by the unstable situation at the professional job market and deterioration of the work conditions.

Student community is also characterized by significant changes. In the past years, students' social-professional and motivational preferences have been changing, along with their requirements towards universities. Student community is heterogeneous, but unanimous in its urge to strengthen their status and utilize their rights in the educational field. Students' opinions on the role of professors in the educational process are transforming; they develop new ideas about an optimal model of student-professor interactions within the consulting services provision (Shilovskaya et al., 2016).

The problems of changing position of professors and students in the conditions of higher-education reforms are addressed in the works of many Russian researchers (Gokhberg et al., 2011; Popova, 2012; Roschina, 2015; Ilina et al., 2016). The researchers analyze social and psychological-pedagogic aspects of interaction between professors and students (Interaction of professors and students in a university, 2015; Svirin et al., 2017; Filippova, 2013; Chebarykova, 2015; Shemetova, 2015). The transformation of conditions and content of professors' work and dynamics of their status characteristics at the current stage are also addressed by researchers in other countries with market economy (Musselin, 2013; Stocum, 2013; Ouardighi et al., 2013).

2. Methods

The necessity of comprehensive analysis of the current situation in higher education defined the use of wide range of scientific research methods. In particular, we used the methods of classification, historical-genetic and comparative analysis.

Empirical foundation was based on the use of a system of statistical data and results of sociologic studies. Present work used the data of official statistics provided by the Russian Federal State Statistics Service (Rosstat), as well as the data obtained during the educational field monitoring conducted by the National Research University Higher School of Economics (Indicators of education, 2016; 2017).

Empirical foundation of the study also included the results of sociological survey of the students of Russian State Social University (RSSU) that was conducted in 2016. The survey was conducted among bachelor- and master students of the Department of communicative management and Department of economics (over 200 people). The survey addressed the problems of professor-student interaction in the conditions of the development of education services market.

Collecting, storing and generalizing the information about the dynamics of the position of university professors and students at the current stage, as well as about the controversies that occur during their adaptation to the new social and economic conditions allows creating a foundation for further deeper analysis of the issues related to the higher education development.

3. Results

3.1. Specifics of interaction between university students and professors in the USSR

Soviet higher school was characterized by authoritarian nature of professor-student interactions. "The perfect interaction included the student's genuine respect towards the professor and voluntary obedience of his rules, i.e., it was not an interaction of mutually beneficial agreement, as in the modern society ("society-market"), but an interaction of son's (daughter's) respect that was typical for the traditional society ("society-family"). Naturally, such ideal almost never occurred in practice, but it set a certain goal" (Ufimtsev, 2017).

The model of student-professor interactions that was established in the USSR had not been officially stated, but it was supported (with minor corrections) and widely spread during many decades.

Students addressed the professors with strict formality; they greeted the professor by standing up when the professor entered the classroom. Strict discipline was maintained during the lessons – it was forbidden to speak to each other, stand up and walk around the classroom, leave the room or enter it without professor's permission. A student was not allowed not sit in a comfortable position; the professor could discipline him/her and make him/her change the position to a less comfortable but more appropriate one, according to the standard of behavior, so that the position would demonstrate highest focus, attention and obedience. The whole system of the educational process organization was very strict: attendance was mandatory, students could not select the subjects to study, all exams had to be taken in a strictly set date together with the whole group, etc.

In fact, the main functions of a professor in a Soviet university included not only pedagogics but also control. A professor controlled the execution of certain rules of behavior and, in case of rule breaking, applied the repressive measures, which could even lead to student's expulsion. However, by requiring precise execution of the established rules, the state guaranteed social support to the students. In addition to completely free education, Soviet students got scholarships, as well as a number of social benefits, such as special prices for public transport, reduces fares for visiting social-cultural institutions, etc.

Certainly, excessive formality, strict control and neglect of students' rights in the Soviet higher education are evaluated negatively by the majority of the modern researchers. Yet it is necessary to consider that the traditional system of student-professor interactions, which functioned for many years, fully corresponded to the general authoritarian model of top-down economy of the Soviet society. In turn, the strictness of internal mechanisms of higher education was compensated by its obvious success in providing high standards of education quality.

3.2. Changes in the position of a university professor in the conditions of transition from top-down system to market relations

Complex and controversial transformations that took place in various aspects of Russian society in the end of the 20th – beginning of the 21st century completely changed the situation of higher education.

In the USSR, the profession of a university professor was one of the most respected jobs. High status of professors was confirmed by relatively high salary, as well as by various privileges, such as decreased number of work hours, duration of vacations, extra space in the apartment, etc. Average salary of a university professor was around 300% of the average salary of the economy in general, while the salary of a young university teacher was 110-120% (Future of higher education, 2013; Zaernjuk et al., 2014). Russian researchers give the following characteristic of the university professors' position in the top-down economy: "Professors' position at the national job market was defined the following way: high (or sufficient) reward, plus higher level of freedom within the job contract, in exchange to a very high (unique or highly specific) level of qualification. As long as the price of the labor seemed sufficient, universities did not have a lack of young people ready to follow such path". (Contacts in the academic world, 2011; Kataeva et al., 2015; Ilina et al., 2017; Kryukova et al., 2016).

The situation changed drastically with the beginning of the market reforms. In the beginning of the 2000s, average monthly income of Russian university professors was approximately 75-90\$. Drastic decrease of professors' quality of life significantly lowered their social status and led to dramatic losses. Tens of thousands of the most active and competitive professors and associate professors went abroad or changed the field of activity; many your teachers left the universities in search of higher-paying jobs. Professors' salaries began to increase gradually only in the past couple of years, because, according to the Decree of the Russian President, in the 2018 the average salary of a university professor has to amount to 200% of the average salary in the economy (Decree, 2012).

Professional activity of a university professor has always been characterized as highly complex work, which combines teaching, research, mentoring and organizational functions. However, currently, the professors' position has become even more complex due to drastic increase in the severity of requirements towards the professor from the university administration, and from the society in general. Currently, successful work at a university requires "super competence". The professor not only has to fulfill his professional duties, increasing his qualification, mastering new technologies and developing more effective methods, but he also has to constantly care about maintaining his competitiveness that is evaluated by a number of formal characteristics (Ilina et al., 2017).

The complexity of professors' position is aggravated by the unstable situation at the professional job market. During the period from 2010 to 2016, number of university professors and teachers decreased by more than 62 thousand people (almost 1/5). The risk of losing the job is rather high for most university teachers, because currently the number of Russian universities is still being

decreased.

3.3. Student-consumer as an active subject of the education services market

Authoritarian model of the Soviet higher education, which existed for many decades, has been destroyed, but it is impossible to state the system of professor-student interactions is approaching the Western model. A modern Russian student does not possess the academic freedom of an American or a European student and is not ready for the level of independence and responsibility that is common abroad. From all complex Western model of professor-student interactions, so far, the Russian students have learned only that the knowledge acquired in the modern university becomes an educational service. And if there is a service market, then the key figure is a student-consumer (To the consumers of educational services, 2017).

Specialists note that, as the consumers of educational services, Russian students are currently the most unprotected people at the consumer market (To the consumers of educational services, 2017). The reason for this lies in the specifics of interactions between the customer and the provider.

- There is no other field where the consumer, who orders the service, has to be held accountable for the quality of its execution himself. However, this is exactly what happens in the university.
- Despite the market laws, where "customer is always right", at the educational services market the professor, i.e., the provider, is usually right.
- While receiving the educational service, the customer is often unable to evaluate its quality. The customer begins understanding that he/she has been taught wrong only after a certain amount of time, when he/she faces the need to apply the acquired knowledge, i.e., after graduating from the educational institution. But by that time the diploma has been already awarded and the contract with the university has already ended.
- Professors think that students come to the university for knowledge. In reality, part of the educational services consumers, i.e., the students, came for the diploma rather than for knowledge. This fact is often used by dishonest providers of the educational services, who often provide the services very low quality.

Certainly, the student community is heterogeneous. Many students are ready for active partnership interaction with the professors and are motivated to acquire real knowledge and professional skills. However, others do not understand their consumer rights correctly and try to interfere with the educational process or even dictate their own conditions to the professors. Coming to the university, a certain number of students act as if they were customers in a supermarket or in an expensive boutique (depending on the category of the university). Such students-consumers do not come to learn and acquire knowledge, but rather to buy (often to buy something that they like or something that entertain them). In this case, the professor that puts too much "pressure" on the students by making them learn the material and setting high standards, is perceived by students-consumers as an annoying obstacle on the way to getting the desired diploma. In the opinion of I.G. Geraschenko, "market approach to education consist in constant bargaining. Everything begins with "beating" the grades out of a professor and ends with the search of different material privileges in the educational process" (2017).

3.4. Evaluation of the professor's position at the educational services market: students' opinion

In order to evaluate professor's position at the educational services market, we conducted a sociological survey among the students of RSSU.

The majority of the students (9 out of 10) perceive themselves as consumers at the educational services market, although they are not fully aware of their rights in the field of education.

At the current stage of development of the educational services market, students develop very specific attitude towards professors. The students give different answers to the question "Who becomes a university professor nowadays?". 4/5 of the respondents think that university professors are people that like teaching; 70% of students are sure that the main trait of the professors is interest towards science. A less pleasant discovery is that 20% of the students think that, more often than not, one becomes a university professor if he/she was unable to succeed in any other field. Obviously, the status value of the professors' activity is not very high for the majority of respondents.

The fact that students do not show much respect towards either separate professors, or their work in general, is often the fault of the professors themselves. For example, many students note that professors complain about their difficult life (low salary, big work load). 18% of students claim that professors complain about their problems very often; 54% think that they complain sometimes. It is not surprising that 3/5 of students feel pity towards their professors. This certainly does not facilitate developing students' respect towards the university professors.

The survey also focused on the question whether the students' opinion should be considered during the evaluation of professors' activity and development of the system of professors' salaries. It is possible to suggest that, within the market conditions, the opinion of the customer of the educational service (the student) has to be significant during the evaluation of the cost of the work of the professor that provides that service. 56% of the RSSU students that participated in the survey think that their opinion should be necessarily considered during the development of the system of salaries for the professors and the teaching staff. Along with this, part of the students think that such approach would make the professors more vulnerable and would make them lower the requirements towards students in order to get positive evaluation of their own activity (Zhesterov et al., 2017).

In general, the student community thinks rather highly about the professional level of the university professors, but, at the same time, students demonstrate the wish to have stronger influence on the educational process and to participate in the development and actualization of individual educational strategies.

4. Discussion

The problems of changing positions of professors and students in the conditions of the establishing educational services market attract the focus of many researchers. Separate statements of the conducted study were reported and actively discussed at various scientific conferences. In particular, the strategies that professors and teaching community can use to adapt to the social-economic conditions became the topic of discussion at the 27th International Social congress (30-31st of October 2017). During the discussion, it was stated that the significant increase of requirements that a university had set for the professors, as well as the increased competition in the professional field, became the reasons of the radical changes in the field of work and occupation of the university professors.

A rather complicated position of any actively working professor is aggravated by the following circumstances:

- A professor works with students that significantly vary in their level of training;
- He/she constantly interacts with "live" audience with unpredictable reactions;
- He/she does not have a sufficient amount of time for direct work with the students, although the work load is very high.

It should be pointed out separately that routine pedagogic work and individual consults with students are not rated very highly within the system of evaluation of the professors' activity. Pedagogic proficiency itself does not have formal measurement, and therefore, is not a factor that affects the level of professors' salary. The only chance to state about oneself and strengthen one's position at the educational services market is preparing original courses and creating electronic textbooks. However, in this case, the amount of time for the real live communication with the students is inevitably decreased, as well as the motivation to use nonformalized techniques of interacting with students (in case if those characteristics are not accounted for in the professors' individual plan).

5. Conclusion

At the current stage, theoretical and empirical material on the problems of adaptation of professors and students in Russian universities to the new social-economic conditions is still being accumulated and systematized.

The conducted analysis of the dynamics of professors' and students' position at the educational services market allows revealing the controversial nature of the changes. Many qualitative shifts in professors' position reflect the general tendencies in the development of higher education. Increased load and stricter requirements towards the level and quality of research and pedagogic activity significantly complicate the everyday work of a professor. Together with that, sometimes professors have to face dissatisfaction, disrespect or even direct aggression from students that try to get used to their new status of "educational services consumers". Some students have deformed ideas about their rights and abilities to influence the educational process, which greatly complicates the establishment of a new model of student-professor interactions that would be adequate for the modern social-economic conditions.

According to the results of the study, individual choice of each professor plays an important role, and students' attitude towards their professor, for most part, is a consequence of the chosen and conducted strategy of professional behavior. However, another important fact is the general policy applied at the federal, regional and interuniversity level, which defines status characteristics, social and professional value of university professors as active participants and conductors of the reforms in the Russian educational field.

It becomes obvious that developing an effective mechanism of partnership interaction between professors and students is a necessary condition for successful development of Russian higher education at the current stage.

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[Index]

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