

Dynamics of Russian Employers' Perceptions on the Training Quality of Specialists in the System of Secondary Vocational Education

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Abstract

The paper deals with the evaluation of specialists' professional training quality within the framework of intersectoral, transborder, public and private models of social partnership described in theories by foreign and Russian scientists. Special attention is paid to providing methodological grounds for cooperation between the total subjects within the vocational education system. The procedure of studying the Russian employers' ideas about the high-quality training for specialists relies on an innovation spiritual and ontological model of social partnership. The model comprises the following components: representation of the educational content through the lens of business futurology on the part of teachers; selection of the educational content through the lens of spiritual and ontological intentions on the part of students; expert evaluation of the educational through the lens of the competitive business environment on the part of the employers. The effectiveness of social partnership is determined proceeding from justified indices: the extent of variability, flexibility and mobility when performing the tasks of teaching the students possessing social and creative assets that are in demand at the labor market in the sphere of children and youth leisure. The paper presents the quantitative and qualitative analysis of the data of questionnaire survey conducted among the directors of educational organizations of culture (a case study of Rostov region of the Russian Federation). The survey has allowed detecting a slight positive dynamics in their evaluations of the quality of specialists' training and outlining the prospects in the development of social partnership between the employers and the educational organizations.

Key words: vocational education, college, pedagogical profile students, social partnership, employers, educational organizations of culture.

Introduction

The actual scale of cooperation between the employers and the organizations performing the professional training of specialists reflects the stages of transformation of the Russian economic sphere. In particular, the figures of employment of higher educational institution graduates have started to gradually increase, after the downturn of 2008-2009. In the central region of Russia (Moscow and Saint-Petersburg) they are maintained in industry, communication, and the sphere of business services. Meanwhile, company executives believe

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that graduates lack entrepreneurial competencies (Bondarenko, 2014), which makes it essential to study the employers' ideas about the entire set of competencies as well as about other components of the quality of education. On the one hand, articulation of this problem in such an aspect is especially relevant for other regions of Russia, their economic sphere having considerable structural distinctions from that of the central Russian regions. On the other hand, studying the social partnership becomes important due to professional standards adopted at the legislation level – ones where business has set out its own requirements for specialists.

A special place within the general labor market system belongs to organizations of social and cultural segment targeted at the development of creative competencies in learners and providing further education of children, e.g. the Children and Youth Creativity Center and the Center for the Development of Children and Youth. On the one hand, the training of specialists for this sphere makes sense in conditions of the innovation economy that demands non-standard approaches from the rising generation. On the other hand, the specific nature of competencies of the employees at the said Centers is associated with these teachers having to master not only pedagogical but also creative competencies. The results of studying the ideas of employers, directors of Children Development Centers about the quality of specialists' training in educational organizations of Rostov-on-Don and Rostov region are described in this paper.

Literature Review

In the foreign works (Canning, 2006, Hughes, 2007, Carlson, 2017), when discussing the relationships between vocational education and corporations, their crisis and new challenges due to the information epoch are described. The effect expected by partners from mere investment of funds into education virtually came to naught in the second half of the 20th century (The UK Commission's Report on employer skills survey 2011: UK results, 2011, Higher Education-Business Partnership, 2016, Hughes, 2007). At the same time, the scientific literature suggests various models of cooperation between the state, the universities and the corporations: *the transborder one* (Vincent-Lancrin, 2006), *the intersectoral one* (Siegel, 2010), and *the public and private one* (Hawley, 2007, Alexander, 2017) that are designed to overcome the said risks.

This approach has brought about the necessity for employers to develop qualification framework for graduates (Lempinen, 2013, Wu, 2017, Tarman & Chigisheva, 2017). In the Russian education, it has resulted in justification and implementation of professional standards

(Ilyasov, 2009), which makes the problem of the quality of specialists' training relevant. So, it is the task of providing justification for the set of college and university graduates' competencies that are in demand with business in various countries within the concept of forming the "new human capital" that joins the range of scientific debates as an especially urgent one (Higher Education-Business Partnership, 2016, University-Business Partnerships, 2009, Lempinen, 2013, Draskovic et al., 2017; Tarman & Yigit, 2013).

The articulation of the partnership problem is not new in the Russian science (Budnitskiy, 2009a, Nazarova, 2012, Ivanenko, 2013, Rudneva & Ovchinnikov, 2015, Vlasova, 2016a, Vlasova, 2016b). The analysis of literature shows that over the first decade of the 21st century the employers' relationships with higher educational institutions changed toward a positive dynamics of graduates being in demand. Small-scale, medium and big business executives of six major sectors of the economy were questioned, and it was registered that generally business was satisfied with the quality of training of the specialists (Bondarenko, 2014). However, a number of scientists come to the conclusion that it is not always that a higher quantity of higher educational institution graduates is up to the quality of their competencies, and the employers' stable demand for highly qualified specialists remains (Manakhov & Ryzhakova, 2014).

In the process of social partnership between subjects, the development of innovation technologies in the economy is an essential factor, which leads to upgrading the vocational education as for the structure of competencies that are required for specialists (Nazarova, 2012). The scientists have worded risks (low professional mobility and high prime cost of goods) the business runs into if it has to employ graduates who do not have the abilities captured by the work functions of certain professions. With regard to this, it is concluded that the profession and qualification structure of the Russian labor market demand is not only far from norms (Zadorina & Teslenko, 2015) but also fails to meet the requirements that are current in the European Union (Higher Education in the Russian Federation, 2012).

Within the framework of fulfilling the Bologna agreements (Gudkova & Osadchikova, 2017), the authors face the task of studying the employers' ideas as viewed from the sphere of further education where the creative potential of youth, the future workers for other economic spheres too, is developed. Given the topic selected, this angle of studying the social partnership is quite telling, because the competencies possessed by graduates are believed by the employers to lag greatly behind the society's request (Vaskov, 2014, Vislobokova, 2014). In the foreign

works, the question has been brought up repeatedly of having to change the set of competencies if based on innovations. In particular, whether the social media can bridge the gap between business and education and thus make a creative approach to the implementation of digital economy relevant seems way not a rhetorical question (Jafferson, 2013). This has served as a methodological reference point for this research too.

Materials and Methods

The objective of this research was to study the opinion of the directors of educational organizations of culture on the quality of training of pedagogical profile specialists employed as further education teachers. The following tasks were set: 1) to determine the methodological basis of social partnership theories within the contemporary foreign and Russian models; 2) to find and describe the pedagogical profile college directors' ideas about the conditions of learning; 3) to question the employers, directors of educational organizations of culture, on the entire range of the educational content targeted at satisfying the needs of the labor market in this social and cultural segment; 4) to compare the results obtained with the 2007 survey data and to identify the dynamics of the employers' ideas about the quality of specialists' training in the system of secondary vocational education.

For questioning the directors, questionnaire forms of the same type were used, with standardized questions conventionally subdivided into two units: the objectives-values and the means-values of the educational content. The authors questioned: 1) the students – the future teachers in the sphere of children leisure; 2) the employers – directors of educational organizations of culture.

Here is an example of some questions of the survey:

- 1) Must the students have a contract for the future work with the employers?
- 2) Who has to control the quality of instruction at colleges (institutes)?
- 3) Sponsorship should be aimed at:
 - a. improving the conditions and means of learning;
 - b. organizing a high-quality on-the-job training;
 - c. enhancing the competitiveness for employment after graduation.
- 4) If students have learning-associated problems, who would you advise them to turn to for help?

- a. to the director of the college;
 - b. to the supervisory board;
 - c. to the future employers;
 - d. to the college teachers.
- 5) Do you think the study programs used by the college are up to the current level of technical and humanitarian sciences?
- 6) Do you think the college has to step up its contacts with cultural organizations (theatres, museums, guided tours etc.)?

The questions for studying the respondents' opinions were edited proceeding from the model (Fig. 1) that is oriented to ontological questions of the professional, social and cultural spaces: what is taught? how up-to-date the means of learning are? how can this content be used in the future profession?

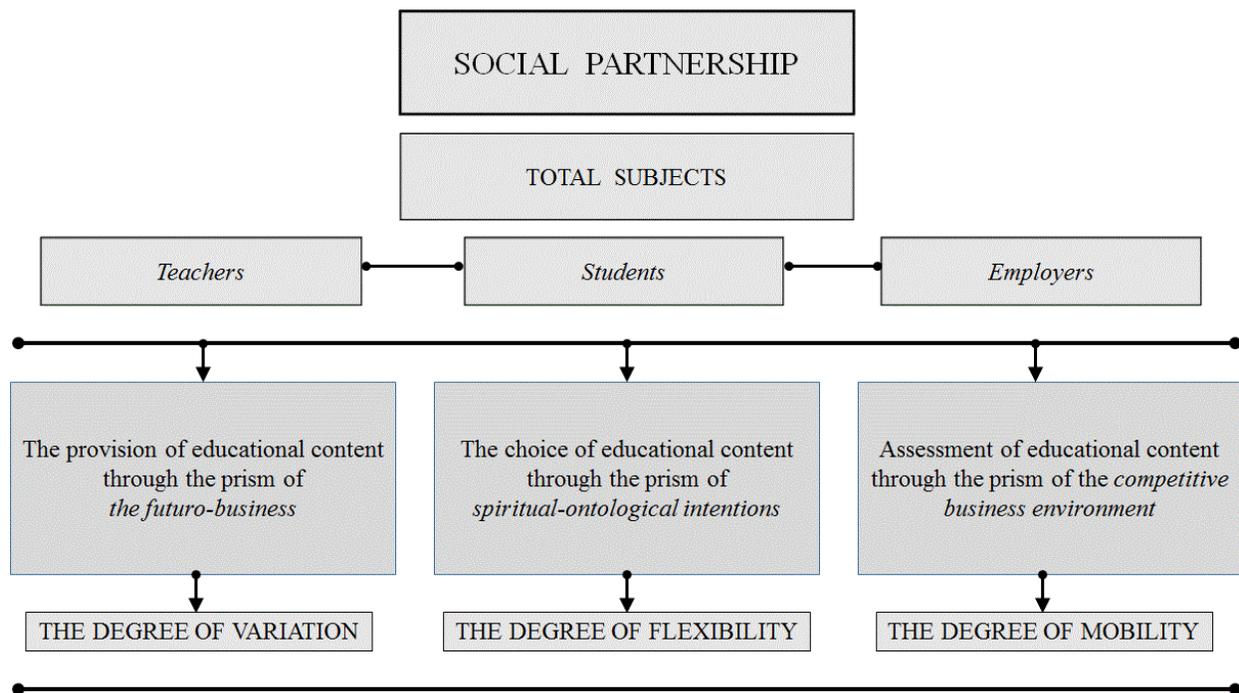


Figure 1. Spiritual and ontological model of cooperation

Source: Vlasova, 2016b

Thus, in this research, the methods of questionnaire survey, interview, and statistical comparison are used for identifying the indices of social partnership according to the extent of *variability*, *flexibility* and *mobility* proceeding from the analysis of answers given by the total

subjects of education as for accomplishing the task of training the specialists having social and creative assets under market conditions.

Results and Discussion

In the Russian science, the debates center on providing grounds for the essence of partnership that is determined as equal interaction of educational organizations, industrial subjects and business structures aimed at the relevant fulfillment of the social mandate for education. With regard to this, it is implied that the employers have to take part in: 1) forming the strategy; 2) determining the content of education; 3) the control of instruction; 4) staffing; 5) material and technical provision; 6) rendering sponsorship (Budnitskiy, 2009a, p. 106). This is in line with the *intersectoral* model of social partnership (Siegel, 2010).

In the first decade of the 20th century, the Russian business was used exclusively as an additional funding source for educational organizations and the partnership within the means-values was not formed (Budnitskiy, 2009b). On the other hand, such an approach looks constructive under a stable economy, which is not the case of the current social and cultural situation. New studies of social partnership in the educational space have become necessary – ones with a focus on the developing economy.

The methodological basis for this research was the notion of technological culture of the society as a "transforming activity in both material and humanitarian areas aimed at bringing the material and spiritual system of the actors' life into harmony with the state-of-the-art achievements of science and technology that allow at a high level of information confidence ensuring the relationships between various social subjects" (Budnitskiy, 2009a, p. 65). The authors have succeeded in questioning the employers on the entire range of objectives-values and means-values that implicitly include the achievements of the certain historical stage of the technological culture. The data obtained were also compared to the similar research by the authors.

Thus, according to the 2007 survey results, the attitudes between colleges and governing bodies could be considered as *stably trust-based within the means-values*, with the partnership between colleges and business *in the space of means-values* being not formed (Budnitskiy, 2009b). In particular, the results of questionnaire survey of the teachers and students bulk demonstrated that the responsibility for the quality of the education obtained failed to become a personal value with the students then. It was concluded that this task could only be solved by an innovation provision of education, which can be seen from the respondents' answers to the means-values unit of the questions.

Given the specific nature of educational organizations where specialists for the youth leisure sphere are trained, the justification of sampling of the respondents in 2017 is as follows. In Rostov region, training in the pedagogical specialities unit having the social and cultural emphasis is performed at 18

secondary vocational education organizations. 9 executives of them were questioned, among them the directors, deputy directors and heads of guidance services of the colleges, i.e. 50,0% of the total quantity. Among the organizations, there were: Azov regional musical and pedagogical college, Volgodonsk pedagogical college, Zimovniki pedagogical college, Zernograd pedagogical college, Kamensk pedagogical college of Rostov region, Don pedagogical college, Shakhty pedagogical college etc.

Questionnaire survey also had to involve the future employers in this social and cultural segment: they are the directors of Creativity Centers. The quantity of organizations performing further education of children and youth in Rostov-on-Don and in Rostov region amounts to 21. In this survey, 9 employers (directors) were questioned, i.e. 42,6% of their total quantity, working at the Children and Youth Creativity Center of Rostov-on-Don, the Center for Further Education of Oktyabrskiy district, the Center for the Development of Children and Youth of Pervomayskiy district, the Center of Creativity of Shakhty (Rostov region), and other educational organizations of culture.

So, the validity of the sampling is evident, and the data obtained as a result of surveys can be raised to the entire general population.

The results were compared according to three indices: variability, flexibility and mobility of social partnership between the pedagogical colleges and educational organizations of culture performing further education of children and youth that is designed to fill up the learners' leisure space.

Judging by the quantitative data (Fig. 2), the employers have stabilized their ideas in the extent of *mobility* and *variability*, as it is on the condition of vocational education that the country's competitiveness greatly depends, among other things.

However, the authors believe that the employers' disappointment with the *flexibility* of educational content is due to the fact that heads of colleges failed to create the spiritual and ontological educational space based on the information and technological culture, oriented to a new type of communication, to a free access to the information being – which is formed in conditions of the students, future teachers, being freed from the routine information and intellectual work.

So, the extent of *variability* was identified proceeding from the analysis of answers to the questions associated with the way how educational content is formed (i.e. how much the college teachers draw it closer to the graduates' future occupation), which amounted to 61,8% in 2007 and to 57,4% in 2017.

Thus, the extent of *flexibility* was identified taking into account the students' rights, i.e. how much the content of elective courses is up to their personal and professional interests. It was 43,7% in 2007 and 33,4% in 2017.

The extent of *mobility* was identified on the basis of the analysis of answers to the questions associated with specifying the employers' participation in all educational processes, management and

organization of on-the-job training for the future specialists included, which was 54,5% in 2007 and 53,7% in 2017 (Fig. 2).

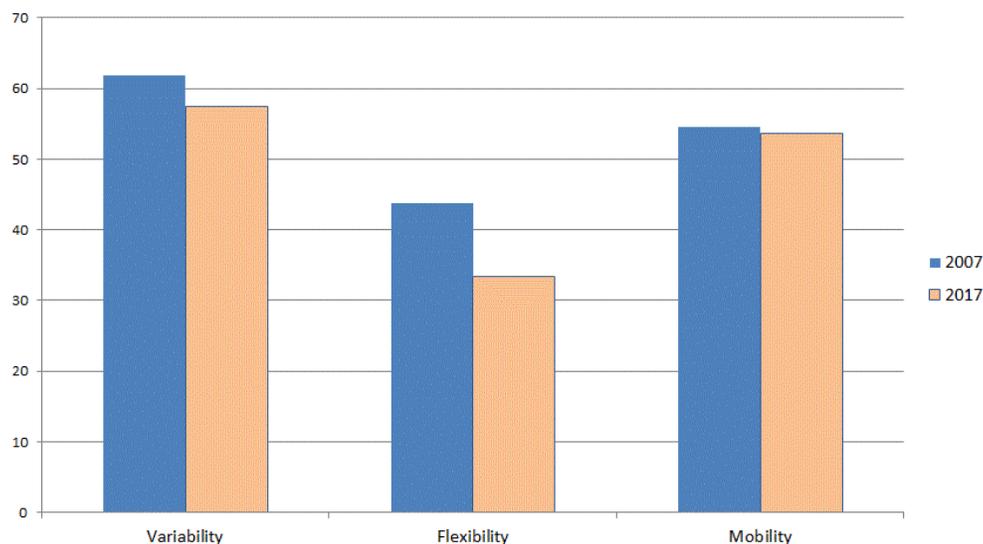


Figure 2. The quantitative dynamics of the employers' ideas according to three indices (%)

Source: the authors

According to the 2007 survey results, it has been concluded that the direct transfer of the market economy mechanism into the secondary vocational education is unjustified because the training of specialists got into an internal conflict situation: on the one hand, equal access to education was declared, on the other hand, the young had to master the profession under profound social and cultural differences.

What has changed in the employers' ideas over the 10 years?

The qualitative analysis of the surveys of the executives is given below.

- Their opinion on the study programs conformity to the contemporary level of the humanities has changed toward the positive.
- The attitudes concerning the employers' evaluation of students' self-government look fairly tense, as the perception of self-government shows it is impossible to expand the variability for the students within the educational space.
- In organizing the activity of pedagogical colleges, a special place belongs to the standpoint associated with financing the vocational education in the form of a credit, dedicated or sponsor's contribution. With regard to this, the employers' answers have shown the impossibility of a full-fledge implementation of them, being dependent on the unstable economy.

- According to the Creativity center directors, the quality of on-the-job (pedagogical) training, physical and cultural training of students has decreased because colleges have to complete urgent tasks first, e.g. IT penetration of learning.
- The functions of controlling the quality of education are quite painful for the employers, as there is disappointment with implementation of the functions, and the answers demonstrate a significant percentage decrease of this parameter: from 68,8% in 2007 to as low as 11,1% in 2017.
- Contrary to 2007, a positive attitude toward the private banking sector has virtually been reduced to naught: the Creativity center directors opted for the "state bank" parameter only, when answering the question on educational loans for their own children.
- In the cooperation, reserves are stably found on the questions of the necessary improvement of study programs, learning conditions improvement, enhancement of competitiveness when getting employed.
- However, if students have any problems, the employers do not advise turning to them for assistance, which confirms again the previous conclusion about the directors' being disappointed in social partnership. Meanwhile, it is "teachers" and "director of the college" who the employers believe to be actual subjects being capable of solving the students' problems.
- There has been a slight increase according to the results of answering the question on the students' families participation in their learning process: from 50,0% up to 66,6%. The small positive dynamics may be viewed as a trend to form a stable system of social values in the Russian Federation and to preserve the traditional patterns of the society.
- Evaluation of the future employment of the students that is associated with making contracts is an essential aspect of trust in social partnership, which is evidenced by the unchanged viewpoint on this question in the employers. Its figure is close to 90,0%.

Conclusion

It is obvious that a slight shift toward the positive in the employers' perception of the quality of specialists' training confirms that the tasks of developing the secondary vocational education can only be solved within the framework of *spiritual and ontological social*

partnership which will thus expand the internal and external scopes of the total subjects' self-development.

It should be pointed out that theoretical innovations have to be implemented too as they will help bring the cooperation in vocational education closer to the transborder model being debated in science (Vincent-Lancrin, 2006).

Studying the employers' opinions about the quality of specialists' training for other spheres of the labor market seems promising, and so does studying the particularities of social partnership from the viewpoint of other total subjects.

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