

ity of higher education opportunities in Kazakhstan. Some recent reforms, such as the emergence of the Nazarbayev Intellectual Schools and Nazarbayev University offering free, high-quality education on a highly competitive basis possibly mitigates the inequalities, however, the inequality in educational opportunities refer to not only the financial constraints but many other factors.

References and notes

- [1] Huisman, Smolentseva and Froumin. (2018). 25 years of transformations of higher education systems in post-Soviet countries: reform and continuity. Palgrave Macmillan.
- [2] Kapelyushnikov, Rostislav. (2008). Zapiska ob otechestvennom chelovecheskom kapitale. HSE University, (in Russian).
- [3] Excluding Baltic countries
- [4] Smolentseva, A. (2012). Access to higher education in the post-Soviet States: Between Soviet legacy and global challenges. *Paper commissioned and presented at Salzburg Global Seminar*, 495, 2-7. https://www.salzburgglobal.org/fileadmin/user_upload/Documents/2010-2019/2012/495/Session_Document_Access-toHigherEducation_495.pdf
- [5] Smirnova, V.A. (2010). Kazhstanskiy opyt reformirovaniya vysshego obrazovaniya. *Educational Studies*, 4, 268-279, (in Russian).
- [6] Bureau of National statistics, stat.gov.kz
- [7] Information-Analytic Center (2017). *Nacionalniy доклад o sostoyanii i razvitiy sistemy obrazovaniya Respubliki Kazakhstan (za gody nezavisimosti)* [National Report on Education in the Republic of Kazakhstan (since Independence)]. KAZ, in Russian.
- [8] Roshchin, S., Rudakov, V. (2015). Do Starting Salaries for Graduates Measure the Quality of Education? A Review of Studies by Russian and Foreign Authors. *Educational Studies*, 1, 137-181.
- [9] OECD (2017). Higher Education in Kazakhstan 2017. *Reviews of National Policies for Education*. OECD Publishing.
- [10] OECD (2019). Skills Matter: Additional Results from the Survey of Adult Skills. *OECD Skills Studies*. OECD Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1787/1f029d8f-en>.
- [11] Kirkeboen, Leuven, and Mogstad. (2017). Erratum to 'Field of Study, Earnings, and Self-selection'. *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 132 (3): 1551–1552. doi:10.1093/qje/qjx025
- [12] Nazarbayev University established in 2010 is excluded from this analysis due to lack of data.
- [13] OECD (2007). Higher Education in Kazakhstan 2007. *Reviews of National Policies for Education*. OECD Publishing.
- [14] Winston, G. and Zimmerman, D. (2004). Peer Effects in Higher Education. In *College Choices: The Economics of Where To Go, When To Go, and How To Pay for it*. Ed. Hoxby C. M., 395–424. U Chicago Press.

The results of the estimations presented in this article were published in:

University selectivity and returns premium: evidence from Kazakhstan, *Education Economics* (2021). DOI: 10.1080/09645292.2021.1958166

Returns to schooling in Kazakhstan: an update using a pseudo-panel approach. *Eurasian Econ Rev* (2020). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40822-020-00148-z>

Employers' Perspectives on Employing Graduates from Russian Universities

Ekaterina Minaeva

Analyst: Laboratory for University Development, Institute of Education, HSE University
eminaeva@hse.ru

Elena Pesotskaya

Associate Professor: Faculty of Computer Science, HSE University, Analytics & Research Director: Changellenge.

Elizaveta Oginskaya

Deputy Director for Analytics: Changellenge

Introduction

A key issue for universities is the relevance of their output to the reality of the modern job market. This often relates to the mismatch of university programs to labor market requirements and the lack of practical and soft skills among university graduates [1]. Being in different institutional domains in terms of organizational culture and agenda, universities and companies have a different pace of change and it is challenging to synchronize the expectations from the job market and the quality of university graduates.

This paper focuses on the employer's perspective of employing graduates from Russian universities and highlights the results of a survey conducted among HR professionals and senior management in 70 Russian companies with a minimum of 500 employees, including leading companies in IT and digital ecosystems, consulting, and production. The survey was conducted in October 2021 and collected 81 responses overall (11 responses were excluded from the analysis due to incomplete survey data, irrelevant industry sector, or small company size); 85% of the responses come from companies located in Moscow and Saint-Petersburg, the rest of respondents represent companies located in Russian regions [2].

Data and insights

While the quality of university preparation for the challenges of the job market may be questioned by scholars and employers, the match between the academic specialization and a position remains the key factor during CV screening in Russian companies (indicated as the most important factor by 58% of respondents). Other important factors are foreign language proficiency (31%), and active academic engagement such as participation in research, conferences, and international exchange programs (30%). Another important factor that positively affects the decision of an employer is participation in case studies and hackathons (28%). The relevance of this factor may be twofold: first, it provides evidence of a graduate's interest in professional development, and second, it demonstrates that a graduate has experience in problem-solving and the practical application of academic knowledge. Finally, the last two important factors are relevant work experience and the prestige of the university (24% for each factor).

The data show that at later stages of selection (after CV screening), employers pay more attention to soft skills and the attitude of candidates. The top-5 factors considered by employers as important at this stage of selecting graduates are candidate motivation (58%), the potential for professional growth and capacity for project/product ownership (46%), analytical skills (45%), ability to work as a part of a team (37%), and professional knowledge (34%). Among other factors are leadership potential (11%) and relevant work experience (10%).

The survey showed that one of the main concerns of employers is the low level of academic preparation of university graduates, this factor is rated as the second biggest challenge when recruiting young candidates (35%). The biggest challenge for the employers is, however, the increased competition for talent (38%). The survey showed that other tangible difficulties associated with the employment of university graduates include retaining young employees (27%), high expectations from graduates (23%), demographic challenges (20%), and the high cost of attracting talent (14%).

University responses to demand in the job market

For decades, scholars and job market representatives have pointed out that dialogue and cooperation between industry and universities is essential when it comes to educating talent for the labor market. Changes in industry are very rapid, and there is high demand for new skills in, for example, analytics or programming.

Critical thinking, problem-solving skills, the capacity for project ownership, and other soft skills remain in high demand. The expectation is that the skills obtained at university will allow graduates to approach and handle any new task within their professional area. The data from the research supports the conclusions from other works which emphasized the importance of universal competencies in the job market [3].

While it is crucial to maintain a dialogue between different academic and industry actors, there are initiatives that can be implemented at the university level, such as extracurricular academic activities, international exchange programs (including virtual exchange which can be more accessible for students from different financial backgrounds). However, while these initiatives address professional skills, universal competencies remain one of the unsolved issues when it comes to preparing graduates for the realities of the modern job market. One way to develop soft skills such as critical thinking, capacity for teamwork, problem-solving skills and strengthen hard skills, is the use of a case-study approach in the university curriculum. The case study instructional method means that the knowledge is not given to a student in a "ready-to-use" format; instead, based on scenarios and problems, students are to observe, analyze, cooperate, discuss, and offer solutions. The method originally came from law, business and medicine, and spread to other fields of studies in the 2000s. Research shows the benefits of this type of learning as a constructivist approach to teaching where the central idea is that human learning is constructed rather than passively absorbed and that learners build new knowledge and construct meaning through active engagement and building on the foundation of previous learning. While the idea is not new [4], it is still far from being widely adopted in Russian universities. There are many reasons for this – from a weak emphasis on universal competencies in educational outcomes to a poor understanding of how to develop universal competencies in practice [5]. However, with methodological support of university teachers and well-designed case studies, this can be a potential solution to the shortage of soft skills among university graduates.

Conclusion

Overall, the insights from the survey show that while motivation of the graduates is a key factor for positive perception by recruiting companies, employers expect graduates to have strong analytical skills and well-developed soft skills which would allow them to take ownership of their responsibilities and act in a rapidly changing economy.

Despite the challenges, Russian universities are responsive to the demands of the job market to a degree. The number of international exchange study programs, events for extracurricular academic engagement, and other initiatives to enrich student experiences have been growing during recent years. However, this relates mostly to high-ranked institutions and there is still a long journey ahead in building a curriculum that meets the transforming demands of the economy.

It is curious that private education actors (such as EdTech platforms or private business schools) across the globe actively use case studies and other forms of constructivist curriculum design. This may be related to the fact that students who pay a significant tuition fee expect to obtain skills that are in high demand on the job market and to receive a higher return on their investment in their education. In order for future students to stay competitive, uni-

versities in Russia could benefit significantly from using the case-study approach and other instruments to develop soft skills in future graduates.

References and notes

- [1] Rudakov V. (2020). Student employment in Russia: incidence, motivation and labor market outcomes. *Higher Education in Russia and Beyond*. 24(3), 8-9.
- [2] The full report on survey results will be available in March 2022 at www.challenge.com
- [3] Gruzdev M. V. et al. (2018). University Graduates' Soft Skills: The Employers' Opinion. *European Journal of Contemporary Education*. 7(4). p. 690-698.
- [4] Brooks J. G. & Brooks M. G. (1999). *In search of understanding: The case for constructivist classrooms*. ASCD.
- [5] For more detail, see Koreshnikova et al. (2021). Raising Evidence-based Policymaking and Internationalization of the Russian Higher Education System: Note 3 - Prepare Higher Education in Russia for Future Skills Needs. World Bank Group.

The Employability Agenda in Higher Education: Drivers and Controversies

Vera Maltseva

*PhD, Senior Research Fellow: Centre for Vocational Education and Skills Development,
Institute of Education, HSE University (Moscow, Russia)*
vamaltseva@hse.ru

Employability is an issue of concern to most national higher education systems and for students employability has become a priority and the main reason for pursuing higher education. Mass higher education and the postindustrial technological shift in the labor market have undermined the job security once associated with tertiary qualifications. Graduates are experiencing higher rates of unemployment and precarious employment worldwide. The skills gaps narrative also contributes to the alarmism over the youth labor market.

The concepts of employability and job readiness are not homogeneous and vary across states, regions, and universities. The common view is that higher education institutions play a role in fostering employability. Universities are expected to be well informed about the changes in the labor market and ensure relevant learning outcomes, equipping students with marketable and employable skills.

Underpinnings of the employability agenda

Linking higher education and the labor market has been a perennial topic in the literature. A functional perspective of education, the idea of education attuning itself to the changing labor market, has dominated the thinking since the last half of the 20th century. Initially, graduate employability had the straightforward meaning of getting a job upon graduation. However, since the 1980s, the concept of graduate employability has expanded to providing relevant skills and ensuring overall job readiness. Employability has shifted from being a primarily demand-side to a supply-side construct, and discussions on how to make students more job-ready have moved to the forefront of higher education institutions' agendas.

Employability can be interpreted in broad terms as the personal characteristics and abilities to get and retain employment, or in a narrower sense — possessing marketable, in-demand skills. The former interpretation implies employability skills, which are similar to the so-called "soft" skills and 21st-century skills but in a practical workplace setting. Amongst them are decision-making, problem-solving, self-management, teamwork, and communication skills. Employability skills are rapidly gaining acknowledgment and are in national skill frameworks strategies. Despite being comparatively less acknowledged, the latter interpretation of employability as marketable skills is also used.

Employability is documented as a catalyst for higher education reform in many advanced economies and in the shift to a more utilitarian focus of higher education. Researchers attribute the expansion of the employability agenda to the massification and vocationalization of higher education. The rapid growth of higher education has led to a more diverse composition of the student body in terms of talents, background, and expectations, as well as a differentiation of institutions and programs. Another rationale behind the employability agenda is the reduction of university autonomy and the rise of employer-university collaboration. Accordingly, mass higher education is "designated" to meet employers' needs for a skilled workforce, ensuring graduates are job-ready, with little or no further workplace training needed. Researchers also acknowledge the external factors driving the employability agenda — the changing world of work and growing labor market uncertainty in particular.

Demand for employable credentials

The massification of higher education results in university degree being reduced to a minimum entry requirement rather than a filter in recruiting (except degrees awarded by elite universities). In the face of degree inflation and the lengthening queue of job seekers with university degrees, there is a need for other credentials to be assigned to high-ranked jobs. A university degree certifies the academic performance of a candidate, while employers are increasingly interested in job readiness and skills matched to the