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Elena Viktorovna Frolova¹
Olga Vladimirovna Rogach²
Anton Nikolaevich Ostrovskii³
Irina Viktorovna Vorontsova⁴
Vladimir Ilyich Savinkov⁵

Promoting the Employment of Students as a Priority Activity of Higher Educational Institutions in Modern Conditions

Abstract

The financial and economic crisis, including the COVID-19 pandemic, determined the negative changes in the modern labor market. Under these conditions, the understanding of the role of higher educational institutions in solving the problems of employment of graduates is of both scientific and practical importance. The key method of collecting information was a questionnaire survey of students (N=974 respondents). The curators of the study groups distributed the link to the questionnaire posted on the Google platform. The purpose of the study is to analyze the specifics of the work of the Employment Assistance Center functioning in the structure of a higher educational institution. It was found that the majority of students (87.8%) consider it necessary to create Employment Assistance Centers in the structure of universities. The following services would be in demand among students: referral for internships, information about vacancies and internships of partner companies, career events, assistance in finding employment during their studies. It is concluded that modern youth is focused on an early start of a career, combining study and work. The following dysfunctions of the activity of the Employment Assistance Center were identified: an insufficient level of information support, a narrowed list of services provided to the students. The conclusion is made that the employment of graduates requires improvement of both pedagogical methods for the development of professional competencies of graduates, and the formation of organizational mechanisms that ensure the provision of services for internships of students, their part-time employment, carrying out activities for interaction with employers. The authors substantiate the concept of "seamless employment" of the students: the integration of the educational process and part-time employment within the study period, focusing the key areas of the university's activities on the career needs of young people.

Keywords: Occupation, Youth, Employment, Graduate, Higher Educational Institution.

Introduction

Dynamic changes in the labor market and the sphere of higher education have put the issue of employment of graduates on the agenda of researchers, politicians and employers, both in developed and developing countries (Rupova,

2020; Damoah, Pephrah, Brefo, 2021; Demchenko et al., 2018). Most university students experience difficulties in the employment process after graduation. This problem is both organizational and managerial, and pedagogical in nature. From the point of

Elena Viktorovna Frolova¹, Russian State Social University, Moscow, Russia.
Olga Vladimirovna Rogach², Russian State Social University, Moscow, Russia.
Anton Nikolaevich Ostrovskii³, Russian State Social University, Moscow, Russia.
Irina Viktorovna Vorontsova⁴, Russian State Social University, Moscow, Russia.
Vladimir Ilyich Savinkov⁵, Russian State Social University, Moscow, Russia.

view of improving the management processes in the field of higher education, it is necessary to increase the effectiveness of the practices of interaction between universities and employers, and to optimize the organizational mechanisms for promoting employment. The pedagogical nature of the problem focuses on the need to build new approaches to training young people in order to increase their competitiveness and meet the requirements of the labor market (Vinichenko, 2016). The dynamic development of society, the "transition to a new technological order" (Aleshkovski et al., 2020) forms new demands for the conditions of training specialists, their competencies, skills in using information and communication technologies, analytical and innovative thinking (Cowley, Humphrey, Munoz, 2020; Frolova, Rogach, Ryabova, 2020). A number of authors conclude that the higher education system has reached a certain critical point in terms of implementing its key functions, without giving its graduates the real skills needed in the labor market (Garcia-Perez, Garcia-Garnica, Olmedo-Moreno, 2021; Grigorieva, Pereverzeva, 2020). The role of an educational institution today cannot be limited only to the transfer of knowledge and experience to the younger generation (Rogach et al., 2017). "In the modern system of pedagogical education, the focus of attention is focused on the issues of personal development of the student, and not on the process of "filling" them with knowledge and skills" (Shabalina, 2017). Universities focused on improving the level of competitiveness are expanding the range of their own organizational functions (Rogach, Frolova, Ryabova, 2017), including identification, analysis, adjustment of professional strategies of young people, assistance of employment (Sofronov, 2016).

The solution of the problem of employment of graduates involves the organization of events aimed at the professional socialization of young people, the development of the necessary competencies (Volchenko, Malyutina, 2019; Zubok, Chuprov, 2015; Matraeva et al., 2020), the formation of adequate ideas about the labor market and their future profession (Sitnikova, 2019). Developing this idea, Ezhukova I.F. insists on the need to provide consulting support on the development of successful career trajectories of a graduate (Ezhukova, 2019). A number of researchers conclude that universities should undertake obligations to interact with employers and sign contracts involving the provision of jobs to graduates of specific training areas (Moss-Pech, 2021).

The research results indicate the relevance of such social problems as a decrease in demand for young specialists, a drop in the level of their salaries (Green, Henseke, 2021), an

imbalance between the career expectations of young people and the real conditions for their implementation. Both in Russia and in other developed countries, the COVID-19 pandemic has had an extremely negative impact on the labor market: an increase in the period of job search for graduates, underemployment, and forced employment in low-skilled positions (Small, McPhail, Shaw, 2021). As noted by the Deputy Prime Minister T.A. Golikova, Russian graduates with higher education are experiencing difficulties with finding a job today. Among the unemployed citizens, the share of young people is the highest, "34% of registered unemployment is made up of young people under the age of 29."¹ The highest risks of youth unemployment are for such areas as law, economics, management, philosophy, sociology and other humanitarian profiles (Sycheva, 2016; Barkhatov, Kel'dyushov, 2018).

The integration of personnel services or employment centers into the structures of educational organizations can become a compensator for these dysfunctions (Ekimova, Prokhorova, Pirogova, 2018). Such an approach can provide a solution to a number of important tasks in the process of youth employment: holding job fairs, Career Days, attracting employers to develop curricula, monitoring the labor market, selecting vacancies, providing consulting assistance to students when preparing resumes. Interaction with graduates who have achieved high professional success, creating conditions for their participation in the organization of practice and internships of students can become an actual area of activity (Garkin, Agafonkina, 2019). Such strategies make it possible to reduce the gap between education and the labor market, to establish stable ties with employers. As the research results have shown, the functioning of Employment Centers makes it possible to provide university graduates with not only up-to-date reference and analytical information concerning vacant places in the labor market, but also with rights and guarantees in the field of employment (Shchukin, Emelkina, 2017). Of particular importance is familiarization with the regional context of employment of young professionals, local requirements of employers (Tran, Blackmore, Rahimi, 2021).

¹ Golikova explained unemployment among generation Z [Electronic resource] // RBC: website. - URL: <https://www.rbc.ru/rbcfreenews/6050d0f89a79472352d6432d> (accessed 20.03.2021)

Methods

The authors conducted the study in November-December 2020. The empirical basis was the Russian State Social University (RSSU). The choice of the research base is determined by the following reasons: the presence of an Employment Assistance Center in the structure of the university, as well as a sufficient period of its work with students for evaluation. In addition, the status of the Russian university, as well as the versatility of student training, determines the wide coverage of young students, both on a territorial basis and in the direction of career trajectories.

The purpose is to analyze the specifics of the work of the Employment Assistance Center functioning in the structure of a higher educational institution

In the course of the work, the authors set the following tasks:

- To determine the level of interest of the students in the activities of the university Employment Assistance Center;
- To study the level of awareness about the activities of the Center;
- To identify the needs of the students in obtaining the services of the Employment Assistance Center.

During the research, the authors used a set of general scientific research methods: analysis, generalization, systematization, etc. The key method of collecting information was a questionnaire survey of students (N=974 respondents). Due to the preservation of some quarantine restrictions during the study period, the questionnaire was conducted online; the link was posted on the Google² platform and distributed with the support of the curators of training groups of all courses, forms and areas of training.

The Results of the Study

The results of the study showed that the vast majority of students would like to use the services of the Employment Assistance Center: 33.7% chose the answer "of course, yes", 34.8% of the respondents – "rather yes than no". However, every fifth respondent (20.6%) found it difficult to answer, which probably indicates some ambivalence of the students' position on this issue, the lack of necessary information about the functions of the Center in building a career for young professionals. The latter assumption is supported by the fact that more

than half of the students find it difficult to evaluate the work of the Employment Assistance Center (58.4%) and only a third of the respondents evaluate its work positively: 15.5% - "excellent", 16.6% - "good". Another 7% of the respondents rate the work of the Center as satisfactory.

At the same time, 87.8% of the respondents believe that they need an Employment Assistance Center at the university, and only 2.4% gave a negative answer. We can assume that the majority of the students give the Center a leading role in determining their employment prospects, providing some confidence in the successful search for their first job. It is worth noting that 21.3% of the respondents were actively looking for a job, another 32.4% of the students at the time of the survey indicated that they did not work.

Despite the fact that more than half of the surveyed students were not employed at the time of the study, 9 out of 10 respondents (90.1%) note that they did not come to encounter the activities of the Employment Assistance Center. At the same time, the students would like to use the services of the Center (figure 1). According to the students, the following services are quite popular: referral for practice/internships (65.2%), as well as receiving information about vacancies, internships of partner companies, career events (65.2%); assistance in finding employment after graduation is relevant for 59.2%. The share of those who would like to receive employment assistance from the Center during their studies is slightly higher – 63.1%. However, participation in events held by the Center, master classes, seminars, and excursions to partner companies is in demand only among a third of the students, which can be considered a quite low indicator.

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<https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1YKVMN75Be3VPTaKEisSvPVMNbUQr68hfm-LbfiPuonk/edit>



Figure 1.

Distribution of answers to the question: "What services would you like to receive at the RSSU Employment Assistance Center?", there are several possible answers, %.

Despite the low representation of those respondents who have interaction experience with the Employment Assistance Center (9.9%), the students actively offered their ideas about what can be improved in its work. In particular, the respondents suggest increasing the number of vacancies submitted (47.1%). Another third of the respondents (31.3%) note the fact that the Center needs to increase the number of events dedicated to the employment of students. Only a small proportion of students note the need to improve the professional level of employees (16.4%).

It should be noted that the dominant share of the respondents (57.6%) consider it necessary to more actively inform students about the services of the Center. Therefore, the next block of the study was devoted to information coverage of the Center's work. To the question

"How did you find out about the Employment Assistance Center?", the majority of the respondents (45.7%) chose the answer option: "I read it on the university's website", received information "from other students" - 33.7% (figure 2). Thus, it can be assumed that both official information channels and "word of mouth", which informally provides information transmission in the student environment, are quite effectively involved. However, the role of the Center in informing is extremely passive, the initiative falls entirely on the shoulders of students. It can be noted that the work of the Center itself practically does not provide information to students: neither the stories of the employees of the Employment Assistance Center, nor the activities carried out by it, do not provide wide information coverage of its work among students.

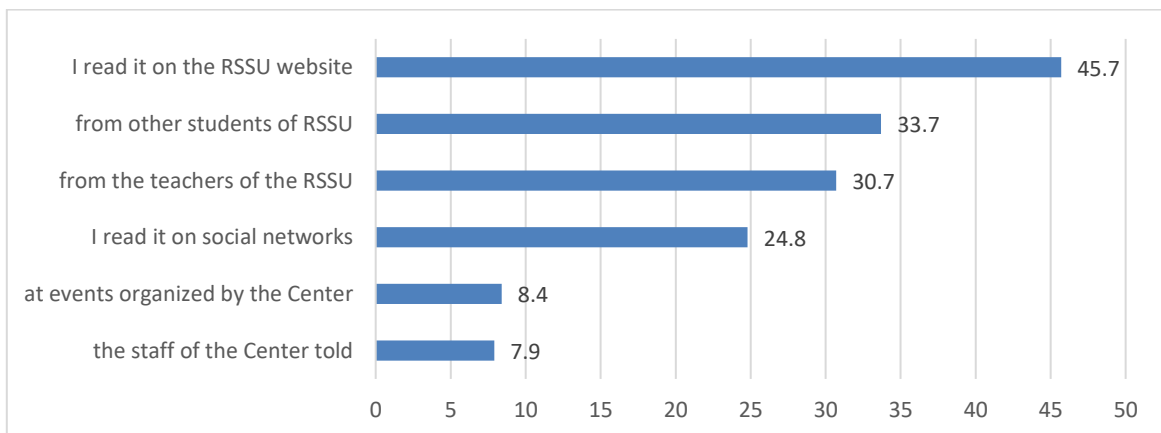


Figure 2.

Distribution of answers to the question: "How did you find out about the Employment Assistance Center?", there are several possible answers, %.

In view of the rather active development of social networks, it is quite understandable that students want to get more information about the work of the Center from this source. In particular, the students were asked the question "Where, in your opinion, it would be advisable to post information about the Employment Assistance Center". The leading positions in the rating were headed by such answers as: on the university's website (70.7%); on the social network VKontakte (68.4%), as well as on the social network Instagram (42.6%). The survey results showed that Facebook enjoys significantly less attention among students (8.8%). Informing about the Center's services through the Student Council, on stands, signs, posters in the university buildings, in information handouts is preferable for no more than a third of the respondents.

Discussion

The survey results showed a high level of interest of the students in obtaining the services of the Employment Assistance Center. These conclusions are similar to other studies, which emphasize the effectiveness of the active position of the university in solving the problems of youth employment. Thus, we agree with the opinion of O. A. Bolshakova, who, based on the experience of the Regional Center for Promoting Employment of Graduates of Tver State University, comes to the conclusion that it is necessary to work comprehensively with students, including first-year students, for their successful entry into the labor market (Bol'shakova, 2017). It is important to not only select vacancies and help in preparing resumes, but also to work on professional orientation and socialization of graduates.

The results of the research showed a certain contradiction between the interest of students in obtaining services related to employment, the recognition of the need for the functioning of the Center at the university, and the lack of practices of interaction with it. The indirect reasons for this contradiction may be the incomplete consideration of the opinions and needs of young people when planning and organizing the work of the Center, the dysfunction of information support for its activities. The availability of primary information for students can be considered as a necessary, but not sufficient condition for their involvement in the activities conducted by the Employment Assistance Center. Answering the question about the proposals that could increase the effectiveness of its activities, most students pointed to the need to develop information support, expand communication channels. It is

interesting that in most scientific papers this aspect of the problem is analyzed in sufficient detail. The authors point out the importance of the information block in the activities of the university when organizing events for the employment of graduates (Garkin, Agafonkina, 2019; Sycheva, 2016).

According to the survey results, the main sources of information about the Center's activities were the university's website and social networks. In the conditions of digitalization, Internet resources are significantly ahead of other communication channels in terms of their popularity. For the new generation of "digital aborigines", the Internet performs both an information and communication role, becomes a field for the exchange of opinions and experience (Dyakova, Sechkareva, 2019). In this regard, it seems quite productive to practice not only providing information on social networks about the activities of the Center, but also analyzing successful experience in organizing practice, internships for students, and selecting vacancies for graduates. These ideas are consistent with the obtained conclusions based on an analysis of the activities of the Employment Assistance Center of graduates at the Mordovian Humanitarian Institute. We agree with the opinion of M. N. Shchukin and I. V. Emelkina, who emphasize the effectiveness of using social networks, forums, electronic services and web applications in the course of work to promote employment (Shchukin, Emelkina, 2017).

Our research has allowed us to identify the priority areas of activity of the Employment Assistance Center, in which modern youth is interested. If in many scientific works the emphasis is on the organization of such events as meetings with employers (Shchukin, Sheyanov, 2018), job fairs, the provision of intermediary services in the employment of graduates (Sofronov, 2016), then our research has shown the relevance of ensuring the employment of students directly during the study period. The majority of the respondents would like to receive information about practice, internships of partner companies, career events. These conclusions are confirmed by other studies, which state that combining work with study, obtaining professional experience gives a start to a successful graduate career (Shukenbaeva, 2016). Dynamic changes in the labor market, socio-economic risks associated with the COVID-19 pandemic actualize students' concerns about the prospects of finding a job. New social challenges are changing the contours of the educational process, orienting universities to modernize their organizational structures in order to assist graduates in the employment

process. Despite the fact that the traditional methods of finding and selecting vacancies after graduation do not lose their relevance, they should be supplemented with new strategies for ensuring part-time employment of students, professional testing of their skills and abilities. We suggest the need for the formation of the concept of "seamless employment" of students, which includes the integration of the processes of education and youth employment within the period of study at the university. The concept of seamless employment requires significant efforts from a university administration, focusing the educational process on the needs of the student, the development of their career trajectories. First, we are talking about both the restructuring of the educational process, embedding the work experience of young people in the training schedule, and the implementation of comprehensive measures aimed at interacting with employers in order to employ a student.

In addition, the analysis of the services of the Employment Center demanded by students allows us to draw a conclusion about possible directions for improving pedagogical approaches to the organization of the educational process. Thus, it seems relevant to embed consulting practices for the development of students' career trajectories in the educational process when studying specialized disciplines. Interactive technologies, such as master classes, business games, trainings can act as additional pedagogical tools for the formation of professional competencies that are in demand on the labor market.

Conclusion

The high level of unemployment among graduates of higher educational institutions actualizes the expansion of the range of key functions of higher educational institutions. Modern youth is interested not only in gaining knowledge, forming professional competencies, but also in helping to find a job and develop their career. In this aspect, the creation of Employment Assistance Centers within the organizational structure of the university is becoming an actual trend in the development of the higher education system. The obtained empirical results showed a high level of interest of students in receiving the services of the Center. The practical significance of the research is to determine the key prospects for the development of the university in the framework of promoting the employment of young people, providing assistance in building their career trajectories. In particular, it seems necessary to improve the information support for the activities of Employment Assistance Centers, expand the areas of its work, focus on organizing events

focused on early career start, selection of vacancies for students during their studies. The assistance of youth employment requires the improvement of modern pedagogical and organizational mechanisms in the work of higher educational institutions. Pedagogical practice should focus on obtaining practical knowledge and skills of graduates in accordance with the needs of the labor market. Organizational mechanisms include measures to create and optimize the activities of University Employment Assistance Centers, building flexible career paths. The authors substantiate the concept of "seamless employment" of young people, integrating the processes of education and employment of a student within the period of their study. "The seamless employment" involves centering the university's efforts on the career needs of students, turning from internal educational processes to external results.

Further areas of research may include the following: an analysis of the resource support for the activities of Employment Assistance Centers, including the sufficiency of the number of full-time staff and their professional competencies, and research of mechanisms for building partnerships with employers. It is relevant to form models of interaction of the Center with various social groups of young people, the improvement of activities to provide targeted support in the process of employment to young people who find themselves in a difficult life situation.

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