



Research Article

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Position of Higher Education System Graduates in the Labor Market: Search For New Opportunities

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Abstract

The ongoing socio-economic and socio-cultural changes bring about significant alterations in the social structure of society and the institution of education. This calls for in-depth research to predict the further development of social processes and determine effective methods of managing them at the society and regional levels. The employment of university graduates has essentially acquired the characteristics of a new social process after the abolition of obligatory employment by distribution. The emergence of new statuses (for example, mixed statuses), in which university graduates often find themselves being unemployed or working outside their professions, has become an acknowledged social fact. The interest of many sociologists in this problem is also due to changes in the functions of social institutions, including the institution of education, an important part of which is higher education. The study focuses on the importance of such obstacles as contradictions between the qualification programs, teaching methods, graduates' competencies, employers' requirements for the same competencies and qualifications, the mismatch between the studied theory and practice, and the identification and justification of the main employment strategies for university graduates. The study objectives are pursued through descriptive data analysis and the qualitative approach with a questionnaire as the main data collection method. The study is conducted on a sample of 130 organization leaders. The aforementioned problems and shortcomings of Kazakh university graduates' training are detected and analyzed using comparative analysis. In accordance with the specifics of the labor market, the authors identify the market, paternalistic, and traditional strategies of university graduates' employment.

Keywords: university graduates, employers, labor strategies, labor market regulation, quality of education

1. Introduction

Youth unemployment is a socio-economic situation in which a young person of working age, ready to perform labor duties and looking for a job, is deprived of the right to work as a source of income due to the lack of jobs. Youth unemployment is a critical characteristic of young people's position in society and their adaptation to market relations.

The modern labor market is shaped by economic transformations. The indicators of this process are high hidden unemployment rates, the gap between the workload and income, untimely payment of wages, inconsistency between the requirements of society and prestigious callings, employers' disappointment with the education system, etc. (Khizbullina, Garipova, 2016, pp. 518-522; Kubrushko et al., 2018). The place of young professionals in the labor market is characterized by critical inconsistencies. The reason for these issues may be the choice of vocation not agreeing to the request within the labor market, but taking after social distinction. That is why a considerable part of graduates do not find jobs altogether or in their specialties, which leads to a rise in youth unemployment. As a result, investments in the education of young people do not pay off. Moreover, employers show unwillingness to hire university graduates without job experience believing that such young people lack practical skills and professional competencies. Thus, the relevance of the study is shaped by the need to search for methods to solve the problem of using youth labor at the present stage of economic development (Bukhteeva et al., 2019; Bikhulatova et al., 2016).

2. Literature Review

Internal and external aspects can be distinguished in employment opportunities. If professional skills are attributed to the internal aspect, then the situation with regard to the labor market should be attributed to the external aspect. The results of our study show that student self-learning skills and the university brand will assist students to get more employment opportunities than their academic learning experience alone. Many curricula of higher education institutions, as a rule, pay little attention to subjects focused on the development of professional, moral, and personal qualities of students. The role of universities in training graduates for the labor market is a topical issue that requires long-term research. This is due to the fact that employers are under constant changing requirements and demand from young professionals to meet the requirements of the labor market. Currently, there is an increasing contradiction between universities, their curricula, and employers' expectations for young professionals. Many employers and students consider that the main goal of university education is to train young professionals in accordance with the requirements of the labor market.

Modern society is currently growing to be not only more interested but also more dependent on the human capital development level, which is crucial for the further effective functioning of the leading sectors of the economy. An expert survey conducted by Russian sociologist R.R. Khizbullin, Ph.D. (official interview N = 30, 2013) shows that employers note a decrease in the quality of professional training of university graduates and believe one of the main reasons for it to be insufficient training in the fundamentals of practice in the obtained profession (Khizbullina, Garipova, 2016, pp. 296-298). The study also demonstrates the following contradiction: employers give preference to specialists with a master's degree, while the vast majority of students are focused only on obtaining a bachelor's degree. Sociological surveys indicate that almost half of the organization leaders believe that vocational education in Russia does not correspond to their idea of its necessary modern level. Around 35% of leaders of medium and large Russian companies speak of the low level of training of the graduates of technical and natural science university departments and almost half of the leaders give low estimates to the level of training of workers with secondary vocational education. According to all-Russian studies, more than half of the population does not work in their specialty. This situation is largely due to the lack of demand for the obtained professions in the labor market, the mismatch between the employees' competencies and the

employers' requirements, a change in professional preferences, and the lack of prospects for career growth and high income in the future (Khizbullina, Garipova, 2016, pp. 296-298; Korotaeva, 2020).

Many researchers note the inconsistency between education and the labor market: the persisting deep gap between the professional and personal resources of graduates and the requirements of the external environment, the tendency of the existing quantity and quality of the trained specialists to not match the structure of employers' demand, and the divergence of the structures of education and the labor market leading to disintegration of the higher education system and increased differentiation of diplomas in the labor market. These factors cause difficulties in obtaining the corresponding and desired job and many university graduates' getting jobs not in accord with their specialties and level of qualification formally provided for by the obtained diploma. The study conducted by Kazakh sociologists A. Sarsenova and M. Maulsharif indicates that the problem of graduate unemployment needs to be examined in conjunction with the socio-economic conditions in which market relations in the sphere of labor are implemented. Given that job search and employment after graduation, as well as the type of the first job, have a long-term effect on a person's decisions regarding their career growth, they can have significant and prolonged social, psychological, and economic consequences (Maulsharif, Sarsenova, 2017; Maulsharif, Bolysbaeva, 2017; Brand, 2015).

In the conducted study, we also identified the following issues faced by young specialists in many countries: 1) high unemployment rates among youth; 2) weak relationships between education and employment. Considering modern approaches and theories of university graduate employment, the key skills affecting employment are specifically practical skills that allow young people to work productively in the labor market. However, universities do not always provide their students with vocational guidance and practical courses that would allow them to adapt more effectively in the labor market. Besides, such problems as a lack of practical skills and professional competencies and work experience often are often associated with young professionals' employment.

It is important to understand the part that universities, managers, graduates, and proficient affiliations play in graduates' employment. The following section provides a detailed description of the empirical study conducted with Kazakh university graduates and heads of organizations. Analysis of the obtained results allows us to discuss some of the responsibilities that these interested parties can take on to assist the development of graduates' job readiness skills.

Solving these problems calls for a deeper understanding of how employers, academic circles, professional associations, and graduates view the requirements for professional skills in the workplace. In the present study, we explore the professional experience of recent Kazakh university graduates.

3. Methods

The study deploys quantitative methodology due to the discovered need to study graduates' prospects to determine what they factually do in their professional practice and what problems they encounter in the workplace. The object under study is university graduates of the given year and the representatives of enterprises and organizations that hired university graduates.

The methodological basis of the study is formed by a survey of graduates and employers. The study was conducted at the Korkyt Ata Kyzylorda State University in 2017-2018 in the Kazakh language. The general population of university graduates was 800 people, 260 of whom were interviewed. This determines the 95% confidence level of the study and the sampling error of 5%. The questionnaire for graduates consists of 23 questions including 8 open-ended, 10 semi-closed, and 5 socio-demographic questions. To assess the employers' opinion on the professional training of specialists at the university and further improvement of the quality of education services, a questionnaire survey of heads of enterprises was conducted. 130 heads of organizations took part in a survey composed of 10 questions including 4 open-ended ones. Answers to the open-ended questions were submitted by the respondents in writing in free form with narrative elements. The questionnaire

was administered by sending the questionnaires to the respondents (via fax and email). Statistical analysis of the quantitative results was conducted in the SPSS program. Verbal responses were transcribed and then subjected to qualitative analysis.

4. Results and Discussion

The staffing problem is one of the most topical for employers. In the sphere of vocational education, employers show demand for the most diversified specialists with higher education. The significance of the information competency is due to the transition of Kazakh society to the informatization stage (Fursova et al., 2017, p. 470-478; Shakirova, 2016). The main and most frequently heard complaint of employers about university graduates today is the isolation of the acquired knowledge from practice. This can manifest itself in different ways: the inability to use knowledge in solving practical problems and to handle modern equipment, psychological unpreparedness for the realities of production, management of workers and employees, and lacking ideas about the norms of behavior in teams and the business environment (Kiesewetter et al., 2016). "The university does not give a person an understanding regarding the work of the company – the heads of organizations note that most candidates have no idea about the structure, organizational culture, and subordination. The way to resolve this situation would be the opportunity to train constantly, starting from the second course, then they would feel more aware and could evaluate themselves by the fourth year and apply for specific vacancies" (Kromydas, 2017).

According to employers, the quality of professional specialist competencies is assessed by applying the acquired knowledge in practice. More than half of employers (52.7%) are focused on potential employees who are capable of further training in relation to the tasks of the company. 49.1% of employers pay attention to the personal and social qualities of a specialist, 47.2% – to the professional qualities of graduates. 52.7% of employers believe that university graduates do not have enough knowledge to solve specific practical problems.

Personality features and skills are also important in the labor market. When hiring a new employee, managers of a company often welcome not someone who has the appropriate qualifications, but those who differ in their personal qualities. To study the personnel potential of the surveyed employers, we posed the following question: "What is the current supply of qualified personnel in your organization?". Most of the respondents (39%) marked the "satisfactory" answer option, as well as "good" – 32%, "very good" – 12%, and "excellent" – 14% (Table 1).

Table 1: What is the current supply of qualified personnel?

| Nº | Gradations | N | Percentage |
|----|--------------|-----|------------|
| 1 | Satisfactory | 50 | 39% |
| 2 | Good | 41 | 32% |
| 3 | Excellent | 18 | 14% |
| 4 | Very good | 16 | 12% |
| 5 | Poor | 5 | 3% |
| | Total | 130 | 100% |

Our study indicates that 41.3% of young people face major difficulties in the labor market. Another 32.4% do not get a job in their specialty. These results emphasize the high relevance of the problem among graduates. Among the surveyed university graduates, 48.5% argue that young people between the ages of 22 and 24 face unemployment more often. More than half of the surveyed youth (63.5%) believe that the main difficulty is the lack of job experience. Less than a third of the respondents (30.1%) say that it is difficult to get a job in a specialty obtained at the university. The proportion of young people who consider "lack of contacts and acquaintances" to be the main obstacle to getting a job is 45.6%. Only 3.1% of the respondents note there not being any difficulties

in youth employment. The factor of “the profession not corresponding to the desired job” also presents a serious obstacle for young people. In our society, there is a known inconsistency between the preferences of young people and the chosen professions. Due to the lack of finances, school graduates are unable to obtain the desired profession and a large number of young people study in specialties for which state grants are allocated. Nevertheless, they are unwilling to work in the obtained profession. “The lack of acquaintances” is the third factor that hinders youth employment. The variables of the need for “acquaintances” and “financial opportunities” reliably come to the fore. The overview touches upon the issue of “the need for information and qualification”. Let us clarify this figure with an example. A young professional is asked a few questions during an interview. The boss asks questions like “Do you have work experience?”, “What can you give to our company?”, and “What are you competent in?”, which is reasonable given that each boss looks for specialists who know their work. A huge issue lies within the fact that the practical preparation of future laborers at universities is insufficient (Indzhigolian, 2014). The current approach to students’ internships causes various issues.

The survey of university graduates also demonstrates the diversity of job search strategies (Figure 1). The process of searching for a job can be viewed as a complex problem involving numerous strategies and stages and addressed in different ways. University graduates tend to utilize the following strategies: *the market strategy* (the opportunity to earn money, career and professional growth), *the paternalistic strategy* (hoping for the state’s assistance, participation in the state employment programs), and *the traditional strategy* (relying on the social capital, looking for help from one’s friends, relatives, and acquaintances). In addition, only a small number of graduates turn to the services of employment centers, while the majority prefer independent job search and personal connections.

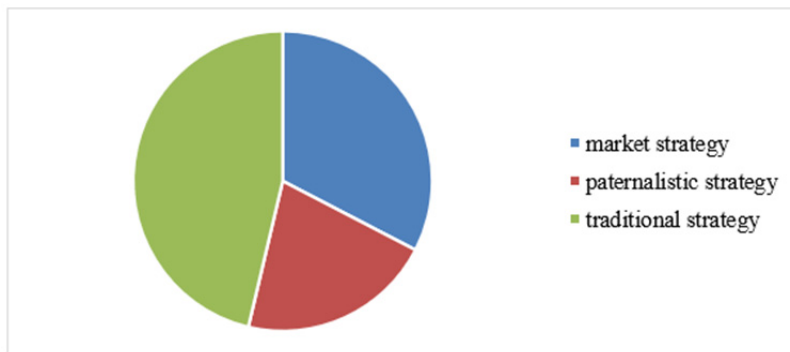


Figure 1: Strategy types

The first post-graduation workplaces of the graduates with no social connections are found to be temporary and not aligned with their specialties. The study shows that the use of the traditional (non-official) employment strategy is characteristic for most of the graduates compared to the market and paternalistic strategies (Table 2). Moreover, this strategy is found to substantially reduce the time costs of job search. In contrast, among the graduates engaged in independent job search and not using any social connections, the process of job search takes a long time and is characterized by low opportunities for employment in the obtained specialty. Thus, the traditional employment strategy is noted to still be widely used by graduates. The employment process for graduates who make extensive use of social networking resources involves the minimum amount of time spent on the job search.

Table 2: Who do you rely on in terms of employment?

| Competence of university graduates | Percentage |
|---|------------|
| on acquaintances (personal connections) | 54.5% |
| on myself | 21.2% |
| on the employment service | 11.1% |
| on the university (job fair) | 4.0% |
| on the media and the Internet | 9.1% |
| on the faculty and the department | 5.6% |

Managers search for candidates with the assistance of various resources (through recruiting sites, recruitment agencies, headhunting, labor exchange, personal acquaintances). However, it has been established that, when recruiting staff, it is common to use personal and corporate contacts, recommendations, and advice from good friends.

Table 3: Which of the following methods does your organization use in hiring professional workers?

| Nº | Answer options | Percentage |
|----|---|-------------|
| 1 | Direct recruitment from universities | 16.3% |
| 2 | Newspaper advertisements | 25.3% |
| 3 | Posting information on the organization's own website | 18.1% |
| 4 | Contacting employment agencies | 33.2% |
| 5 | Getting information from colleagues | 7.1% |
| | Total | 100% |

Let us move on to consider the other side of the problem: how do employers hire young people, what strategies do they use, and what is their motivation? The results of the survey conducted in this area show that employers are looking for the right employees with the help of a large number of resources. Be that as it may, most bosses broadly utilize such techniques as individual and corporate contacts and associates, suggestions, and exhortation of close colleagues when selecting a worker. Thus, although the employers note that acquaintances do not play a considerable role in the recruitment of graduates, this method of recruitment continues to be one of the most reliable and efficient.

Employers are ready to actively cooperate with universities on the organization of students' practice and provide guidance on their thesis, as well as on the issue of professional development as personnel of enterprises (Li et al., 2020). The study identified the main problems in the relationship between employers and university graduates. Their high expectations for initial salary and position characterize the behavior of young people at the present time. As a result, they refuse jobs offered to them, despite the conditions created (solving housing problems, providing subsidies for retraining, etc.). According to employers, the personal qualities of graduates – the desire to study, improve themselves, find a common language with colleagues, activity, and purposefulness – are of great importance for them, along with professional preparedness.

Patriotism, respect for national traditions, morality, humanism, charity, tolerance, physical and spiritual development – a full, although not exhaustive, list of the basic values instilled in students in the learning process (Musakhanova et al., 2019). A certain level of cultural, moral, intellectual, ethical, and aesthetic behavior is provided by educational institutions. The study and creative use of the experience of previous generations, the absorption of the culture of the native people, and the continuation of the cultural and historical traditions of previous generations – all this is transmitted to young people through educational activities organized by cultural and educational institutions, including higher education institutions. In the process of education in a modern educational institution, one should consider the ethnicity of the individual, their interests and needs, as well as those of the state and human civilization (Harackiewicz et al., 2016).

Cooperation between universities and employers should be conducted on all aspects of the socialization of young people. A particularly important aspect of this is the professional formation, development, and growth of the personality of young people based on specific work motives and values (Gotov na trud – pochemu ne berut., 2006, pp. 35-40).

According to the main results of the study, it was revealed that university graduates are not ready for unexpected and uncertain situations that they face in the labor market. Vocational training departments at universities carry some responsibility for preparing graduates for such situations. Some problems faced by universities in preparing students for complex tasks call for new approaches to teaching and training, new ideas about knowledge, and new ways of student engagement. Yorke and Knight (2004) prompt the creators of instructive programs for vocational departments at universities to concentrate on the main parts of instructive programs to evaluate the opportunities they can give to students. The analysts contend that it is profoundly vital to assess the degree to which the evaluations concur with the outcomes of module preparation, work abilities, and appraisal criteria. This approach can be a starting point for universities to consider how to best prepare their students for new circumstances.

Work procedure necessities such as keeping track of tasks, prioritizing, and developing creative thinking are becoming significant skills that graduates must learn. Many professionals also require the creative and discipline skills necessary to respond to unknown and unknowable situations. At university, it is possible to focus on developing such skills as abstract and systemic thinking (seeing individual components, as well as the whole picture), creative thinking, analytical skills, the ability to work in a team, and communication skills. Attributes of a graduate have to be developed in such a way as to make sure that graduates are competent in their field of study and have the required professional capacities (Sergeeva et al., 2019).

The study results indicate that according to the employers, the most prominent obstacle for young people's employment is "the lack of work experience" (noted by 81.5%). 50.9% wish to see a high level of university graduates' knowledge in their specialty. 41.8% point to such qualities as purposefulness and reliability, activity in achieving not only personal but also corporate goals. 36.3% note initiative and discipline, the ability to fulfill one's professional responsibilities and make managerial decisions, and 34.5% stress the importance of emotional stability and communicability.

To ensure the corresponding qualities of graduates, it is necessary to accomplish the following tasks:

- training of students in job search skills and independent employment.
- training students in self-presentation and meeting abilities. Managers pay attention to what students consider to be critical for their professional development.

4.1 Training graduates for learning

Universities can utilize approaches that foster flexibility, independence, and the ability to learn. For instance, modeled and real projects, internships, roleplay games, teamwork, and tasks on solving problems amid extended work or assignments are some strategies that have been successfully implemented by many departments of Australian universities for the development of self-learning skills.

Many graduates find that the concept of learning at work differs from the learning they are used to at university. The use of in-depth learning approaches can improve students' self-development and prepare graduates for lifelong learning.

The classical educational model was more focused on the acquisition of academic theoretical knowledge. Modern approaches require the formation in students of not just knowledge, but also the willingness and ability to make informed and responsible decisions and subsequently implement them. Such characteristics of a future specialist can be formed only in the course of activity, and the level of development of these competencies is determined by the degree of involvement of the student in the educational process.

As a result, we can say that the educational activity of university students acquires a personal meaning for them and becomes a source of activation of self-development and the formation of a professional trajectory. It is this interaction between employers and universities in determining the necessary requirements for graduates and selecting the content for the formation of additional competencies with a focus on solving urgent problems of the industry that will drive the enterprise to improve the quality of training of future specialists. Self-development and personal growth can be a result of experiential (deep) learning (Shishov et al., 2018).

Universities should also expand their industry relations and introduce students to the world of business throughout their university long-life learning to avoid a "culture shock" of students when they start to work. Work-integrated learning utilizing internships is well known since it gives students an insight into the workplace and allows them to understand the relevance of theory and practice. They are mandatory in many disciplines (for example, health and nursing). Another way to prepare alumni-freshmen for the industry is to involve currently working alumni sharing information about their work experience and the barriers they encountered getting started and how they overcame them. Universities can prepare graduates for the reality that most entry-level occupations require cooperation and supporter parts while leadership roles emerge later in their careers; this means that students gain information about the different hierarchical structures of the workplace and organizational culture. Some employers may utilize "peer" status instead of "command" status. These structures are based on the "responsibility", "duty", or "significance" of work roles. University graduates find it necessary to work with professionals from other disciplines in the course of their studies. Some graduates rarely work explicitly in their discipline; they become aware of the need to use general skills acquired during university studies. Other graduates with more professional degrees leave universities in search of work in their chosen field and are in no haste to recognize the general skills that were developed during their studies at the university. To take full advantage of the real professional potential of graduates, one should ensure that graduates are aware of their strengths and open their minds to job search opportunities, not only in the sector dedicated to a particular discipline but also in other sectors, where they are likely to find work.

4.2 *Training graduates upon entering the workforce*

Employers who require skills from alumni are responsible for supporting the training of graduates when they start their activity in an organization. In this situation, the manager is objectively interested in providing the employee with the opportunity to gain new knowledge, skills, and investments. If new knowledge and skills require exclusive training, then the organization will undertake the creation and financing of both educational structures and personnel training.

4.3 *Facilitating on-the-job and organizational training*

Currently, the following types of in-house professional training of personnel have developed. Vocational training in programs for the professions of workers and positions of employees is the training of persons who previously did not have a profession or position. Vocational training under retraining programs for workers and employees is the vocational training of persons who already have a profession or position in order to obtain a new one, considering the needs of production.

Vocational training under advanced training programs for workers and employees is training aimed at consistently improving professional knowledge, skills, abilities, and competencies in the existing profession or position without increasing the educational level.

Internships allow mastering both theoretical knowledge and practical skills, abilities, and competencies. An employee undergoing an internship shadows the work of experienced specialists, performs certain work under their guidance, and thus develops skills, abilities, and competencies for solving a wider range of professional tasks. The internship is carried out both directly at enterprises and in other organizations, including overseas.

Traditional forms, types, and technologies of training are becoming a deterrent to the professional training of personnel. This is due to the following reasons:

- distraction of staff from their main activities for the period of training;
- the remoteness of the regions from the center and the increase in the costs of business travel of employees;
- the need to periodically update the knowledge and skills of the staff of organizations;
- dynamism of regulatory and legal reform of various spheres of activity.

4.4 Improving socialization at work

Young graduates should be provided with assistance for their socialization. Some practical suggestions may include hosting work parties, inviting past graduates to speak about their experiences, emailing lists of past graduates to the current ones, and helping new employees to establish connections. One can also utilize past graduates to guide new graduates, give particular continuous job-related input, and assist in work challenges. The graduates who took part in the study consider both formal and informal work events to be useful since they help them learn more about the organization and colleagues, as well as to develop the necessary professional skills.

5. Conclusion

Our main argument is that all interested parties, such as university faculties, employers, professional associations, and graduates, can contribute to the development of graduates' skills, and each party must take responsibility and cooperate with others. Our study strongly suggests that universities are not solely responsible for developing the skills of recent graduates. Employers and graduates themselves have to provide an important contribution to the development of those skills that can only be acquired through practice. Some job skills take longer to develop than the duration of university studies. One of the key issues discovered in the study is the insufficient readiness of graduates for new, unfamiliar, unexpected, or unknown situations. Vocational training university departments are responsible for preparing graduates for work in a super-complex world and for learning in uncertain situations, for helping them develop knowledge and awareness of the work environment and form initial expectations from work. Employers are responsible for assisting students in search of jobs or for helping them acquire job readiness skills. Also, at a high level of importance, although secondary, is professional training, which assumes the ability of a specialist to consciously plan and carry out professional activities, which, of course, is associated with their ability to set and achieve goals and willingness to assume responsibility. One of the main factors of professional success today is the degree of personal and professional maturity of a specialist, manifested in their ability to consciously guide their own behavior and activities based on conscious motives-goals and life principles.

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