

Development of Career Centers of Russian Universities: Challenges and Opportunities

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Abstract

Placement training of students for employment is a serious challenge for modern Russian universities. University graduates are faced with solving the problem of employment in the face of continuous transformation of the labor market. As a result, the issue of training highly professional specialists capable of adapting to the dynamically changing requirements of employers and willing to build a successful career throughout their lives is on the agenda. As the university practice of career centers shows, the job search assistance and employment support is usually carried out within its framework. Meanwhile, the issue of training students for career development should become a key one in the philosophy of university education. In modern conditions, universities are designed to prepare a student who is potentially capable of acting independently to develop his career to meet the challenges of the labor market and his own vision of an individual educational trajectory and professional interests. Thus, university training programs for specialists in a context of ever-changing technologies in the professional sphere need to be adjusted accordingly. It assumes restructuring the system of relations between all the subjects of the educational process, when it is necessary to take into account the importance of readiness for employability and building a career of a university graduate and his life self-determination. Despite the importance of the employability problem and career development readiness to achieve the sustainable development of the Russian economy, this topic has been little studied by domestic scientists. At the same time, Russia's higher education development agenda began to see the problem of graduate employment as a special one especially during the pandemic. In particular, the topic on developing career centers of universities has gained momentum in the large-scale program of the Ministry of Science and Higher Education of the Russian Federation on the development of Russian universities Priority-2030. Thus, this study will be useful to the stakeholders of systemic changes in processes related to building employment conditions for students and graduates. Also, this study can contribute to analytical basis development for the expansion of career centers of Russian universities.

Keywords: *Employability, Career, Work Readiness, Competencies, Career Centers.*

Introduction

Review of Trends in the Work of Career Development Institutes with Regard to Employability for Graduates of Higher Education.

Today, employment of young specialists is supervised by the government and relevant ministries. The quality of staff training and their competencies have become performance indicators of universities. In this regard, studying essential characteristics of the associated job/work readiness phenomenon and employability become particularly important, that is, competencies that allow one to advance his/her career throughout life [1, p.45].

In 2015, the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) launched the Career Readiness Initiative to meet the fundamental need of new college graduates and professionals in career development. Career centers operate in all universities in the USA. Similar centers operate in the higher education systems of Great Britain, Germany, Austria, Denmark and other countries of Western Europe, Asia, etc. Currently, there has been a common understanding of what is necessary to start and develop a successful career, namely: career and self-development, communication skills, critical thinking, fairness and participation, leadership, professionalism, teamwork, knowledge of technology, as well as a basic set of competencies to start a successful career [2-9], etc.

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In mid to late 20th century there was a graduates employment and distribution system in Soviet universities that ceased to exist when the country transitioned to a market economy with the requirements for professional competencies of graduates changed. In a changing labor market environment, specialists who are open to continuous training and can adapt to changing economic needs are most in demand. Students who demonstrate the ability to adapt to changes in the work environment and have valuable soft skills are more likely to succeed than those who do not possess these skills [9, p. 205].

The purpose of the study is to study the activities of career centers of Russian universities in the context of employment development tools and students job readiness.

This study is predicated on the following assumption that in turn comes from a literature review which suggests that taking into account the international trends in the labor market - growing turbulence, precarious employment, rapidly changing labor market requirements for professional skills and abilities – universities are having to deal with more responsibility for the professional future of their graduates which should serve as a stimulus for career centers. On the other hand, in these conditions, it is becoming increasingly irrelevant to implement the employment promotion policy like we used to as in "training for a specific workplace". Based on this assumption, the research hypothesis is formulated.

Hypothesis. The work of career centers of Russian universities is shifting from traditional practices of direct employment assistance meaning that these centers help to find a specific workplace, develop employability competencies and train independent career development skills.

Materials openly posted on the official websites of universities, special websites of career centers or other universities' specialized departments served as the sources of information on career centers' operation. The study used methods of document analysis, as well as statistical data analysis.

Almost every university has a structure responsible for providing assistance in graduates employment. However, experts agree that the main task of Career and Employment Centers is not just to get their graduates employed after graduation, but to train a set of special characteristics and skills (employability skills) so that the graduates would be able to find their workplace and develop their career [10, p.137]. Foreign researchers H. M. Tomlinson [1], Grubb W. N., Lazerson M. [6] Schomburg, U. Teichler [11] believe that the "massification" of higher education and the fact that university education has reduced its performance to the main goal of delivering profession and finding a workplace adversely affects the final level of graduate training. A more promising area of Career Centers' work would be the graduate employability in cross functional competencies. It is proposed to understand the concept of graduates employability as their ability to learn throughout life and the ability to build a flexible professional trajectory instead of "adjusting" to short-term requirements" [10].

The main qualities of a valuable employee in the modern world are the ability to perform non-routine cognitive tasks [12], since the labor market has been greatly transformed. S. McGuinness, K. Pouliakas, P. Redmond [8], B.E. Gimpelson, R.I. Kapelyushnikov, A.L. Lukyanova [13] state that today there is a shortage of relevant skills and abilities in society (professional and personal qualities necessary for successful performance at work), which is due not only to the lack of maximum readiness for work and that of necessary skills, but also to the inefficient use of human capital generally.

Skill mismatch represents the mismatch of skills available in a candidate for a vacancy or an employee that are necessary to perform work tasks.

The key mismatch identified by employers are the gap in available skills (skill gap) and the shortage of skills (skill shortage). The first term implies insufficient knowledge of skills to successfully complete work tasks, which forces employers to organize on-the-job training. The skill shortage creates even more serious difficulties: the inability to close vacancies due to the lack of candidates with the necessary skills. However, the negative effects of skill gap eventually turn out to be more enormous: the problem of skills shortage is solved by hiring a relatively suitable candidate who has to be retrained on the job. Thus, skills shortage can lead to so-called skill gaps [14, pp. 43-74]. Most researchers in the field of labor market and education are

moving away from using the level of education as a substitute for data on skill proficiency. Work readiness is considered as the ability to learn throughout life and the ability to build a flexible professional trajectory. Researchers Mozgovaya A.V. and Yaishnikov A.Y. similarly suggest viewing the concept of "employability" of a graduate as the ability to adapt not only to professional activity, but to use the skills acquired at the university in any other activity following graduation [15]. This approach is fully in line with the modern discourse of the labor market, asserting joint responsibility for the development of skills between the individual, employers and educational organizations [10].

Thus, today's trend in career centers operation is the awareness of the upcoming professional activities as the ability to learn throughout life and the ability to build a flexible professional trajectory instead of "adjusting" to short-term requirements [10]. Work readiness or employability evolves and transforms from simply being graduate employment after graduation into a set of special characteristics and skills (employability skills) required to find a successful workplace and advance further career. As a result, the problem of employability, which had initially presented an issue of demand (labor market) and been solved by programs to increase employment rate, turned into a supply issue (education market), the mission of the professional education system, including higher education.

To implement the task of developing cross functional skills set for Career Centers, experts suggest paying attention to training soft and hard skills [16], implementing a model of an individual career concept at the university that promotes the formation of professional competencies among students, conducting master classes on digital and supra-professional competencies, attracting students to volunteer activities [17], developing and implementing elective courses on time management, goal setting, self-presentation, planning, mental flexibility [18, pp.93-96].

Among the main tasks of Career Centers, there have also been issues on analyzing the current labor market, selecting and informing graduates on available vacancies, arranging internships and on-the-job trainings, as well as interacting with employers (holding meetings with students and graduates, creating and implementing joint educational programs, etc.), monitoring graduate employment. According to I.E. Denezhkina, S.A. Posashkova, K.I. Shcherbina, the interaction of the university with organizations can be achieved through arranging internships, scholarships, holding large competitive events with valuable prizes, arranging specialized departments [19, p.156].

Among the main problems in the work of the Career Centers A.D. Galyuk and N.V. Cherepanov single out the isolation from other structural units and highlight the need for creating a university body responsible for reaching out to external organizations for employment opportunities [20, p.70]. M.S. Elizariyeva and E.V. Vereshchagina note the expediencies and advantages of creating a CV and vacancies database for graduates of their university and employers [21, pp.43-45].

Research Methodology and Data Collection

The universities have been selected for the career centers analysis based on the database of universities that had participated in enrollment quality monitoring in 2020 (conducted annually by the HSE since 2011). The total population was 399 universities. Then the universities were divided into three categories depending on the size of the student intake: large (over 2000 people); medium (from 900 to 2000 people), small (from 500 to 900 people). Then a random selection of 50 universities from the three selected categories was carried out. Two selected universities were excluded because they were branches, which is why the final sample consisted of 48 universities: 18 of them are large, 16 are medium and 14 are small. The universities where the authors of this study are employed were not included in the sample due to direct affiliation and in order to avoid conflicts of interest.

To analyze the activities of career centers, 9 criteria were selected that reflect their main tasks and functionality. These criteria represent the main tools for promoting student employment, as well as boosting employability:

Traditional Employment Promotion Tools

- practice organization activities;
- conducting career days, meetings with employers;

Transitional (Mixed) Tools

- working with students to prepare them for employment (preparing a CV, passing an interview, etc.);
- informing about job-openings (announcement, content and forms of placement);

S. New tools for the development of employability:

- organization of training courses, lectures, seminars on cross functional skills (soft skills);
- availability of graduates network (availability of a club, association, graduates stories, its activity)
- availability of an open portfolio of student achievements;

Other tools were also recorded: work to promote the employment of persons with disabilities; additional career development activities for students, organization of project work, career guidance activities and participation in recruitment.

The source of information on the operation of career centers were materials posted on the official websites of universities in open access, special websites of career centers or other specialized departments of universities, their social networks and publications in the media about their activities, the activities of the supervising Ministry of Science and Higher Education, executive authorities and other interested parties, whose publications reflected the issues under study.

Each criterion, depending on the extent to which it is relevant in the activities of career centers, received a point in the range from 0 to 3. The points were assigned to a specified criteria as follows:

0 - the tool is not available;

the tool is poorly available or present/irrelevant on paper only, etc.;

the tool is available and applied;

the tool is widely used/presented in detail.

The final points that career centers could receive, in accordance with this method of analysis, are in the range from 0 to 27. This range of points is divided into 4 equal intervals:

0-6 – low level of application of the considered tools (criteria);

7-13 – the level of application of the said tools is below average, the tools are available on paper only;

14-20 – the average level of the said tools applied;

21-27 – a high level of application of the tools in question, the tools are available and presented in detail, and are widely used.

The analytical grouping of universities for the enrolment of students and the evaluation of the activities of career centers was carried out as follows. We will take the admission of students as a factor sign, and the evaluation of the activities of career centers as an effective one. The optimal number of groups for grouping universities on the basis of "admission of students" was established using the Sturges formula [22]. Intervals for the implementation of equal - interval grouping were determined using the formula:

$$i = \frac{x_{\max} - x_{\min}}{n} \quad (1),$$

where x_{\max} is the largest value of the attribute;

x_{\min} – the smallest value of the attribute;

n is the number of groups.

To test the second hypothesis, which consists in the assumption that the effectiveness of career centers is more pronounced in large universities, that is, it is related to the number of students accepted, such types of analysis as methods of document analysis and statistical data analysis were used.

Study Results of Career Centers: From Employment Promotion to The Development of Cross Functional Competencies

Large universities are in a relatively more advantageous position in terms of the significant number of stakeholders who, entering an educational organization, take over part of the functionality for organizing internships and trainings (initially offering ready-made packages and programs with early employment and a targeted order for graduates), which directly stimulates the work of career centers and facilitates the implementation of the main indicators. The support of large corporations, and often direct supervision of universities, sharpened for the industry by major players in the markets, raw materials, IT, social sphere (doctors, etc.) allow one to build recruiting mechanisms operating directly with the university. It is worth noting that large universities are large centers, million-plus cities, industry centers, etc., which also forms an infrastructure funnel around them that absorbs graduates.

Secondary universities have a significant diversity both in profile and geographical location, which is of strategic importance, especially when these factors coincide. It is this category of universities in the struggle "for survival" that shows the greatest desire to form a competent policy in the field of promoting the employment of their students and graduates, which is proved by their ratings in the study of career centers, which are several positions higher than the best indicators of large universities. At the same time, the average scores for the grouping of universities, expressed in points, decreases in proportion to the size of universities from large to small (Figure 1). As the size of the university decreases, there is a decrease in the average assessment of career centers' activities (or other departments performing their function).



Fig. 1. Average Performance Ratings of Career Centers of Universities of Different Sizes (In Points)



Fig. 2. Areas of Work of Career Centers (Percentage of Universities Using the Tool, %)

Informing about vacancies is one of the key tools that universities of different sizes use in their work (Figure 2), this tool refers to transitional tools, which illustrates the prevalence of transitional tools in the work of career centers.

For large universities, the development of soft skills (new employability tools) and holding career days and meetings with employers (traditional employment promotion tools) are also among the popular tools. The most popular tools for the work of medium and small universities are similar, they carry out activities for the organization of on-the-job trainings (traditional tools for promoting employment) and work with students to prepare them for employment (transitional tools) (Table 2).

Table 2. Generalized Comparative Characteristics of the Universities Under Consideration

Criteria	Universities		
	large	medium	small
Average admission of students in a group of universities, people.	2651,06	1078,19	560,43
Average assessment of the activity of career centers for a group of universities, points	10,22	9,0	5,36
Key tools of career centers' activities	Informing on job openings (transitional tools)		
	Development of soft skills (new tools for the development of employability)	Practice organization activities (traditional employment promotion tools)	
	Holding career days and meetings with employers (traditional employment promotion tools)	Working with students to prepare them for employment (transitional tools)	

As the size of the university decreases, there is a decrease in the average assessment of career centers' activities (or other departments performing their function). Informing on vacancies and job openings is one of the key tools that universities of different sizes use in their work, this tool belongs to the transitional toolkit. For large universities, the development of soft skills (new employability tools) and holding career days and meetings with employers (traditional employment promotion tools) are also among the popular tools. The most popular tools of medium and small universities are similar, they carry out activities for the organization of practices (traditional tools for promoting employment) and work with students to prepare them for employment (transitional tools).

Table 3. Application of Tools by Universities' Career Centers to Promote the Employment of Students and Graduates

Tools	Tool type	The number of universities under study using the tool				The share of universities using the tools, %
		large	medium	small	total	
informing on vacancies	Transitional	15	13	8	36	75,0
practice organization activities	Traditional	10	11	5	26	54,2
conducting career days, meetings with employers	Traditional	13	9	5	27	56,3
working with students to prepare them for employment	Transitional	10	8	6	24	50,0
organization of courses, trainings, lectures, seminars on cross functional skills (soft skills)	New	13	5	3	21	43,8
availability of a network of graduates	New	9	7	2	18	37,5
work to promote the employment of persons with disabilities	Others	6	3	2	11	22,9

availability of an open portfolio of student achievements	New	1	1	1	3	6,3
additional career development activities for students	Others	0	1	0	1	2,1

The most popular tool in promoting the employment of students and graduates (Table 3) is to inform on vacancies (found in 75% of the universities studied). This is a up-to-date area of work on providing information about in-demand specialists in the labor market, related to transitional tools.

54,17% of the universities studied are engaged in organizing practices in one form or another. Practice, on the job training is an integral part of the educational process, during which students not only master the necessary competencies, but also get acquainted with potential employers. Holding career days, meetings with employers was noted in the practice of 56.25% of career centers of the universities under consideration. It is also a traditional tool for promoting the employment of students and graduates.

Work with students on their preparation for employment is found in the work of 50% of the universities studied. This aspect is an important part of the work of career centers, since it is often difficult for students and graduates to carry out independent work in this direction.

The organization of courses, lectures, seminars on universal skills (soft skills) is noted in the work of 43.75% of universities. Basically, this tool is used by large universities. The development of supra-professional skills is becoming an integral part of the work of career centers, since modern employers are interested not only in the level of professional competencies of their employees, but also in the formation of an appropriate level of supra-professional skills, which has to be additionally carried out outside the framework of the main professional educational programs.

The presence of a network of graduates, found in the practice of 37,5% of the career centers under consideration, is more typical for large and medium-sized universities. A relatively small percentage of the universities studied have an open portfolio of student achievements (6,25%). However, for many applicants and university students, this could become an additional motivational factor.

Attention is drawn to a rather low percentage of career centers that carry out work to promote the employment of persons with disabilities (22,92%), while such graduates require special attention in terms of their postgraduate support and assistance in finding a job.

Thus, according to the results of the study, it can be concluded that mainly large universities tend to move from traditional graduate employment activities to full-scale career centers using various tools, including new tools for the development of employability.

Conclusion

An analysis of the activities of career centers has shown that career centers of universities are significantly transformed in their functionality and work practices and are moving away from a narrow profile of employment of graduates to the development of universal competencies and the creation of conditions for effective employment at the stage of his training. From job placement, job fairs, employer presentations and other "classic" forms of interaction, career centers are increasingly expanding their functionality towards research, analytical, educational activities, as part of additional career-building courses filled with master classes and relevant content for the formation of career tracks, with the involvement of employers to participate in both career events, as well as in educational modules from career centers.

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- Online resources
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 The official website of the HSE <https://ege.hse.ru>
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