

Applying best European practices of engaging employers in training future professionals in Russian higher educational institutions

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Abstract

Currently, cooperation between business community and higher education institutions (HEIs) is a priority trend of the Russian higher education system. We consider the European practices of cooperation between universities and potential employers which is being implemented in the Russian HEIs within the project 'Evaluation of Quality of Cooperation in Education Ecosystem as a Mechanism for Building Professional Competencies—E3M' approved for funding within the European Commission Tempus IV in 2013. E3M Project is aimed at promoting the reformation and modernisation of the higher education in the Russian Federation. Specific project objectives provide assessing for the cooperation between HEIs and working-life organisations using general evaluation framework. This study dwells upon the state of cooperation between Nizhnevartovsk State University and local business community, considering new market conditions and offers solutions to the challenges of productive cooperation with potential employers with the view of the best practices implemented by European partner universities and project consortium members.

Keywords: Cooperation, quality of education, employers, university.

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1. Introduction

Modern economy places high demands on the quality and content of vocational education. Cooperation between the world of work and higher education institutions (HEIs) is a priority goal in the development of the Russian system of higher education. As the Russian higher education is integrating into the European higher education area, it has led to accepting a number of commitments to implement the goals of the Bologna Declaration. One of the goals of the Russian higher education is improving the quality of educational programs based on the competency approach, which requires close cooperation between HEIs and employers (Baidenko, 2002; Margaryan & Dikova, 2013).

From the historical viewpoint, Russian system of classical vocational training provided a considerable amount of time for fundamental theoretical studies, leaving practical activities directed at reinforcing skills in the course of simulation experiments not directly related to the future occupation of students. As it was quite difficult to arrange any real-life practical training at the university premises, a future employer had to deal with improving the practical skills and helping young professionals to master industrial technologies at the workplace. A survey held among the university graduates and aimed at identifying the problems affecting the quality of vocational training. The problems revealed two most significant issues: there is a lack of employment system for future graduates (53.5%); the existing higher educational programs are isolated from the actual market needs (20.6%) (Davletshina, 2011; Tatur, 2004).

Traditional ways of organising higher education and shaping its content are unable to meet the demands of the modern employment market in terms of supplying trained professionals. Such modern workers are required to have new skills and techniques and be ready to upgrade their professional skills and master new subject areas if necessary.

Another crucial problem of occupational training is a lack of understanding between HEIs and business community. While requiring professionally trained university graduates as future employees, many working-life organisations articulate their demands in a formal way and are unable to provide students with conditions for a successful on-the-job training. Student practical training is often formal and inefficient.

2. Forms of cooperation between European HEIs and working-life organisations

Russian universities are still quite traditional when it comes to cooperating with the world of work. Potential employers are usually engaged in the teaching process, do lecturing and hold master classes at universities, participate in job fairs, provide information on job openings, take part in state certification and provide internship opportunities for students. At the same time, there is a growing interest and attention towards the cooperation between business and education communities due to the need in developing new cooperation forms and ways of motivating partners.

The Russian system of education certainly requires new interesting and effective forms of cooperation between working-life organisations and universities. European countries enjoy successful models of engagement and interaction between the academic world and businesses. Some best European practices are put to uses in Russian universities.

For instance, Germany has special vocational centers training staff for production, services and agricultural companies. Here, one sees great opportunities for cooperation between an educational institution and businesses when organising the teaching and learning process. During the year, students are able to join various social projects allowing them to master certain professional skills. This is a 'working year' model. In addition, all German federal states have regional clusters offering more cooperation opportunities for universities and businesses. It should be noted that the German Ministry of Economic Affairs is now allocating funds to support cooperation between academic and business communities rather than to develop specific innovative projects.

Another European country, Sweden, plays a special role in developing the cooperation between the world of vocational education and business community. The cooperation model is regulated and financially supported by Swedish government and is based on the concept of continuing education, close interaction with employers and educational programs adapted to the needs of the labour market. Vocational training is preceded by vocational guidance. Here, the basic principle is to develop the conditions for successful interaction between the public sector, universities and business community. Moreover, Sweden government established a special innovation agency VINNOVA aimed at promoting effective collaboration between companies, universities, research institutes and the public sector by encouraging and developing innovative research with a true potential and increasing support of HEIs in commercialisation of Research and Development (R&D).

Danish HEIs pay much attention in practical training and internships. In the Netherlands, there are national councils related to particular professional profiles. Technoparks promoting and managing knowledge and technology flow among universities, research institutes, companies and markets are another interesting European practice.

3. Tempus IV project 'Evaluation of Quality of Cooperation in Education Ecosystem as a Mechanism for Building Professional Competencies—E3M'

Various European Commission grant programs, such as Tempus, Erasmus+ and so on pay more and more attention to the development of innovative cooperation between the academic world and business community. For example, the goal of developing partnerships between Russian universities and enterprises was set as a national priority within Tempus IV program. This step indicates the need for closer collaboration between HEIs and world of work. Particularly, as a result of the sixth call for proposals of the European Commission Tempus IV project 'Evaluation of Quality of Cooperation in Education Ecosystem as a Mechanism for Building Professional Competencies—E3M', aimed at supporting the reforms and modernisation of the higher education system in Russia, was approved for funding.

The project consortium includes 11 partners from Finland, Spain, Austria, Belgium and Russia, namely, JAMK University of Applied Sciences in Jyväskylä, (Finland), acting as the Project Coordinator, University of Girona (UdG) (Spain), Artesis Plantijn Hogeschool Antwerpen (Belgium), Carinthia University of Applied Sciences (CUAS) (Austria). Russian project partners include Nizhnevartovsk State University (NVSU), serving as the Russian Coordinator, Voronezh State University, Herzen State Pedagogical University of Russia and Academy of Labor and Social Relations. The consortium was also joined by non-academic partners, namely Agency of Educational Strategies & Initiatives (Bologna Club) (Russia), SPACE Network (Belgium) and Jyväskylä Regional Development Company Jykes Ltd (Finland). E3M Tempus Project officially started in January 2014, and it is to be implemented by October 2016.

E3M Project is aimed at promoting the reformation and modernisation of the higher education in the Russian Federation. Specific project objectives provide assessing for the cooperation between HEIs and working-life organisations using general evaluation framework. The project implies sharing experience in cooperating with working-life organisations on the international and national level, testing and implementing best practices, developing universal and specific methods of developing and maintaining such cooperation, and integrating the vocational training programs into the business and production process.

The project is divided into nine work packages, each of them was designed to achieve a specific objective. At the moment, the project teams have completed several work packages, particularly, Work Package 2 aimed at analysing the current state of cooperation between universities and employers. During this stage of Tempus Project E3M, JAMK University of Applied Sciences developed an assessment system aimed at identifying the stage and major types of cooperation between partner universities and employers. Work Package 3 involved developing action plans for the Russian partner universities, as well as organising benchmarking visits to EU partner universities. During such visits, the

representatives of Russian universities were able to learn about the specific features of strategic partnership between universities and employers of Austria, Finland, Belgium and Spain, visit a number of workshops and share their experience with European colleagues.

Most European universities participating in the project have presented a practice of a special university office dealing with the interaction between the academic and business communities and arranging on-the-job training and internships for students.

European universities have special inner organisations establishing links between students and employers and promoting students on the labour market. In such case, an employer can act as a customer interested in a potential employee for a particular job. European students usually start their career while training at the university in return for the means spent on them by employers. After graduation, no additional investments are required for further training of young professionals.

In this respect, it is worth to consider practices in Austrian universities. For example, CUAS is working closely with the Chamber of Labor of Carinthia, sharing experience, exchanging human resources for training, organising various activities, joint publications and developing joint training courses. In addition to acting as a legal agency in labour, social security, consumer protection matters, the Chamber of Labor of Carinthia (Klagenfurt) deals with non-formal education and supports master and doctoral research. The organisation is also appealing as a potential platform for student internships and further employment of CUAS graduates.

International Student Service (Villach, CUAS) provides career support (preparing and checking curriculum vitae (CVs), giving guidance on career choice, individual guidance and so on). In addition, the International Student Service maintains close contacts with potential employers and other universities. Thanks to these contacts, the service is informed about classes and lectures in various companies, company tours, careers and employment. This information is distributed among students. In addition, the service also holds regular job fairs.

Speaking about the practices observed and lessons learned in Finland, it could be said that JAMK University of Applied Sciences (Jyvaskyla, Finland) has established an efficient scheme of interaction with businesses, which supports regional strategic development, reinforces commercialisation of R&D and facilitates life-long learning, student and staff mobility. The system of student vocational guidance and career support organised at the JAMK University of Applied Sciences aims at providing JAMK students with advice throughout the whole training period and assistance in designing professional portfolios and searching for job opportunities.

In Jyvaskyla, cooperation between universities and employers is supported on the city administration level, due to the fact that HEIs and companies are expected to support regional development. Regional development strategies, which are available to general public, are included in the HEI strategic development plan, as well as prioritised by the companies. Thus, the interests of HEIs and companies not only overlap but also complement each other and comprise a twofold approach to empower regional/national development. Compared to the EU, Russian HEIs are rarely provided with support on the governmental level, but rather follow strict instructions from the Ministry of Education, to fulfil an order for training, always irrespective of local and regional needs and demands.

During the benchmarking visits, the JAMK University of Applied Sciences presented its model of Concept Lab. It is a learning environment enhancing students' capabilities to conduct user-centered research and design in a multidiscipline, multicultural context. Students engage to hands-on innovation work developing novel service, product or business model concepts either for their own business idea or for a local or global company. Concept Lab is in tight cooperation with Living Lab as well as regional business networks and aims to educate out-of-box thinking, capable, co-creative and networked professionals apperceiving design, concept and innovation methods. Hence, students grow understanding of concept work, build up a concept development plan and take main responsibility of their teams work and performance. The university also established a Team Academy combining the

world of business and education, where all student teams operate as independent cooperative companies.

Another interesting practice was observed in the UdG in Spain. In Girona, cooperation between universities and employers is supported on the city administration, regional and national levels. Various organisations, such as Federation of Business organisations of Girona (FOEG), are actively involved in collaboration with the UdG. UdG has formed strategic alliances designed to promote inter-territorial cooperation in terms of tourism studies in Spain. As compared to Russia, the universities rarely network with other HEIs, different organisations within a particular field of expertise on local, regional and national levels. UdG system of student traineeship management is quite different from the frameworks employed by Russian HEIs. In UdG, a particular full-time staff member (at each faculty) is responsible for supervision of student practical trainings. There is a special documentation procedure as well as a database of more than 1,000 potential employers. Needless to mention the SMART specialisation strategy implemented by UdG aiming to form close partnerships between universities, regional authorities, industry and other stakeholders, where universities are often crucial institutions in regional innovation systems. The launch of these strategic activities was followed by design of educational program 'European Master in Tourism Management'. The program is the result of cooperation between UdG and an extensive network of relevant non-academic partners who are involved at all stages of its implementation. The inclusion of employers to curricula design, launch of educational programs (possibly short-term courses) could be applied in Russia on condition the employers could expect an added value from such cooperation.

Scientific Park, operating at the premises of UdG connects academic world and businesses. By providing surrounding companies with laboratories (R&D) and other facilities, UdG transitions generated knowledge to market. UdG has established extensive cooperation with the FOEG which runs Job Fairs (Job 'Speed Dates', where students interact with many potential employers, industry representatives by having quick conversations), events which gather representatives of WL to communicate with students on the regular basis. FOEG established a database for UdG students to post their profiles and CVs, which enables students and employers to communicate within a local web network.

These European practices of cooperation between the academic and business communities are difficult to apply within the Russian education system. However, by introducing some cooperation models one may significantly increase the effectiveness of practical student training. Following the benchmarking visits, Russian project participants are now engaged in the activities aimed at promoting cooperation with employers, based on the best practices, recommendations and reviews of employers shared by the European colleagues.

4. Forms of cooperation between NVSU and working-life organisations

NVSU acts as a project coordinator in Russia. The European practices learnt during the benchmarking visits are a great opportunity to modify the way a HEI interacts with the world of work and introduce the elements of European models within the work of various university services, faculties and departments. For instance, NVSU has a Career Development Centre providing a broad range of services aimed at supporting NVSU students and graduates in planning their careers and achieving their professional goals. Such services include career advice and support, refresher training, professional testing and consulting, distance learning and so on.

The University will soon launch an Internet portal aimed at promoting direct communication between job seekers and employers via posting CVs, information on training courses, relevant internship and job proposals. The business community is welcome to use new, non-conventional forms of cooperation, such as arranging job fairs, open days, Academy of Employers and various job contests. Local employers are always eager to see an applicant 'on the job' before hiring, so they

would definitely appreciate this new functional electronic portal, which allows comparing CVs and viewing the responses to posted internship and job proposals.

The University is also opening offices of its academic departments and faculties opened at local enterprises, which can serve as a unique platform enabling to combine the financial resources of the business world and the intellectual potential of the university and providing a favourable environment for solving a variety of mutual educational challenges.

For instance, an office of NVSU Department of Ecology is located at Yugraneftegaz, a local research centre. Based on the agreement between the university and the company, the platform allows cooperating and implementing various investment and other projects and programs aimed at improving practical student training and bringing it in accordance with modern technological and economic requirements of the company.

This cooperation model is aimed at meeting several objectives, including the improvement of professional experience of NVSU students, arranging joint final projects for bachelor, master and PhD students, developing joint research papers, patents and databases.

The University is now considering approaching large industrial companies (regional offices of Rosneft, Gazprom) with a view to develop cooperation and establish a system of corporate training for company staff. The system will require the university to improve its teaching methods and training facilities.

5. Conclusion

Higher education programs in Russia are based on Federal State Educational Standards (FSES), which suggests ample opportunities for HEIs in terms of developing educational programs and courses. In addition, FSES require engaging working-life organisations and business community into the teaching process. This is an essential condition and, to a certain extent, a guarantee for maintaining and developing the practical aspect of educational programs.

The educational standards will be further developed and the requirements towards certain competences will be generalised within groups of specialties and training areas. The occupational standards widely introduced into the educational process are also becoming an essential reference point in meeting the learning outcomes of basic vocational education programs. HEIs are required to consider the recommendations coming from the working-life organisations and, therefore, search for new solutions when organising the teaching and learning process. The current level of legal groundwork for education brings ample opportunities for HEIs in terms of engaging potential employers in the development and implementation of educational programs. Another essential factor for developing mutually beneficial partnership is raising the awareness of business community concerning its role in training future professionals.

Joint European projects supported by Tempus allow developing the contacts between Russian and European universities, including student mobility and internships, participation in various international conferences and seminars.

By using the opportunities to study the best European practices of developing the cooperation between the academic and business communities Russian HEIs are motivated to create various forms of such cooperation considering local economic and legal peculiarities.

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