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AN ECONOMIC IMPETUS FOR ENHANCING EMPLOYABILITY SUPPORT ACROSS HIGHER EDUCATION IN RUSSIA

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Achieving economic development through the development of skills is a policy priority throughout Eastern Europe and Central Asia (International Labour Office, 2016a) and it is with the ILO that the Russian Federation's tripartite constituency of government, employers' and workers' organisations recently signed a new Programme of Cooperation (International Labour Office, 2016b). Continued improvements to general education are essential in the long-term while, for the short-term, higher education has a particularly important role to play as graduates take up managerial roles across the Russian Federation. This research focuses on just one aspect of that much broader initiative with the ILO, by addressing the issue of employability-related support for higher education students. While progress has already been made, with three Russian universities in the global employability rankings list, further international opportunities to collaborate with other universities exist through initiatives such as the Erasmus+ scheme in Europe, the Generation Study Abroad initiative in the USA and via the BRICS consortium of rapidly developing nations. These three options alone accommodate over 80% of the top-ranked universities worldwide for employability and such collaborations could help embed additional seeds of economic growth in Russia.

Keywords: *economy; employability; graduate; higher education; Russia*

JEL classifications: *I0, I12, J0, M0, O1*

ЭКОНОМИЧЕСКИЕ СТИМУЛЫ СОВЕРШЕНСТВОВАНИЯ ПОДДЕРЖКИ ВОЗМОЖНОСТЕЙ ТРУДОУСТРОЙСТВА В СФЕРЕ ВЫСШЕГО ОБРАЗОВАНИЯ В РОССИИ

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Реализация экономического развития через развитие умений и навыков является приоритетом политики, проводимой в Восточной Европе и Цен-

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тральной Азии (International Labour Office, 2016a), и Международной организации труда, с которой трехстороннее представительство Российской Федерации, состоящее из представителей правительства, организаций работодателей и работников, недавно подписали новую Программу сотрудничества (International Labour Office, 2016b). Постоянное совершенствование общего образования имеет важное значение в долгосрочной перспективе, в то время как в краткосрочной перспективе особенно важную роль играет высшее образование, поскольку выпускники в Российской Федерации занимают управленческие должности. Данное исследование фокусируется только на одном из аспектов масштабной инициативы с участием Международной организации труда – вопросе содействия трудоустройству студентов высших учебных заведений. Тогда как определенный прогресс уже наблюдается – три российских университета вошли в глобальный рейтинг трудоустройства, – существуют дальнейшие возможности для международного сотрудничества с другими университетами посредством таких инициатив, как схема «Эразмус +» в Европе, инициатива «Поколение обучающихся за рубежом» в США и консорциум быстро развивающихся стран БРИКС. Только эти три варианта обеспечивают возможностями трудоустройства более 80% университетов, входящих в первые строчки рейтингов по всему миру, и такое сотрудничество может способствовать внедрению дополнительных источников экономического роста в России.

Ключевые слова: экономика; возможности трудоустройства; выпускники; высшее образование; Россия

Introduction

Facilitating economic growth through the development of skills amongst workers remains a policy priority throughout Eastern Europe and Central Asia (Strielkowski and Sanderson, 2013; Abrahám et al., 2015; International Labour Office, 2016a) and establishing effective and relevant programmes to support such aims is a critical factor in achieving success. The potential net benefits though are substantial with the prospect of economic growth, diversification of the economy, technological innovations and the creation of more and better jobs (Jiroudková et al., 2013). Some of the key challenges include establishing effective links between employers and education providers, and identifying the skills gaps that exist. The focus of this research is on exploring some of the potential enhancements that may exist in providing enhanced employability support for students at higher education levels in Russia, particularly through links with external organisations.

Employability-related initiatives in Russia

Russia has been working closely with the United Nations (UN) International Labour Office (ILO) to establish a variety of employability-related initiatives. The ILO was formed almost a century ago and is the only tripartite agency in the UN, bringing together governments, employers and workers' representatives from its nearly two hundred nation state members to set labour standards, develop policies and devise programmes that promote decent work for all. It is with the ILO that the Russian Federation's tripartite constituency, of government, employers' and workers' organisations, recently signed a new Programme of Cooperation (POC) for 2017-2020 (International Labour Office, 2016b) to help improve employments prospects and standards across the Russian Federation. General education has a key part to play in meeting these objectives in the longer term and, in the shorter term, to start progressing further towards economic development, higher education has a

particularly important role to play as university graduates take up management positions and roles of responsibility across the Russian Federation. The focus of this research is on just this one slice of that much broader POC initiative with the ILO, and addresses the issue of employability-related support for higher education students in the Russian Federation.

In a comprehensive review of the need for suitable skills to help achieve strong, sustainable and balanced economic growth across the Group-of-20 (G20) major economies (International Labour Office, 2010), it is made clear that education is the first priority and that stronger links need to be established between educators and the world of work. It is also highlighted that, to best match the capabilities of an individual with the needs of organisations, both educators and employers should work directly together to ensure relevancy. The report provides examples of such initiatives, including Russia's on-site training initiative for 85,000 graduates, highlighting that there are already steps underway at higher education levels in Russia that include external partnerships, study abroad, work experience and internships. Indeed, in its most recent report (International Labour Office, 2016c), it is emphasised that formal education is not the only way to develop capabilities and that, while such attributes may not be directly visible as qualifications, they can nevertheless be in place or developing, as illustrated in the case studies provided, including those from Russia.

Graduate Employability in Higher Education

Many of the stakeholders in higher education, especially governments, students and external organisations, stress the importance of graduate employability to higher education institutions. In the UK, The Higher Education Academy (2012) has responded by developing a definition of employability:

"A set of achievements, skills, understandings and personal attributes that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy."

Such a definition provides the skeleton upon which employability-related initiatives can be added, making a higher education establishment aware how it can help enrich a graduate's career prospects and help satisfy the desires of the range of interested stakeholders.

In the higher education sector, the employability-related attributes of students are enhanced in various ways. This may be in the subject course materials themselves, in organisational placements of multiple types or in voluntary activities for example. Careers centres are also prevalent and their aim may be to help the students plan their personal development (Becket and Kemp, 2010; Bill and Bowen-Jones, 2010) or develop skills and other qualities (Maher, 2010). On skills, Andrews and Higson (2008) identify a selection of soft skills (such as reliability, coping under pressure, strategic planning, interactions, communications, confidence, self-management abilities and a willingness to learn) and hard skills (such as a relevant qualification, knowledge and expertise in particular subject areas, analytical and problem solving abilities). Specific learning objectives may also be targeted in an internships or organisational placement (Higson and Parkes, 2010) and, as an employment consultant, Bolles (2014) emphasises the importance in ensuring that such skills are transferable. Rae's (2010) research identifies recent evolutions in the desired graduate attributes and highlights the importance of teamwork, social awareness, ethics, sustainability, careful use of resources and feminine values. Developing such attributes is often far better achieved through experiences rather than simply through developing an understanding (O'Leary, 2015a) and hence the value of experiences outside of, or in addition to, the traditional degree content. To help support this, there is indeed a pronounced trend across higher education sectors to establish closer ties with external or-

ganisations across the private, public and third sectors (Young, 2014; Barnett, 2014; Kettle, 2013; Mourshed et al, 2012; Wilson, 2012) in the form of partnerships and collaborations of various types.

Such collaborations are often described using words such as placement, internship, project, enterprise and innovation and, although the details vary, each tends to aim to provide the student with an opportunity to experience the activities of an external organisation, whether that be in the private, public or third sector. Establishing such relationships was a key objective in the Wilson (2012) review and one of its recommendations was the formation of a National Centre for Universities and Business (NCUB) in the UK. Such collaborations are managed in several different ways across academia (Quality Assurance Agency, 2012); by an institutional central unit; in a faculty or departmental central unit; through specialist lecturers and other educators embedded into the curriculum; via the Careers service or its equivalent; or using student clubs or societies. Often it is a blend of all of these that contributes to the overall picture and the benefits of providing such employability-related support can be summarised in terms of the 3C's of Content, Capability and Character (O'Leary, 2012 and 2013); Content being the accumulation of relevant knowledge and information networks; Capability the direct application in a relevant employer context; and Character an attitude and ability to work alone and in teams.

University Employability Rankings

The most recent Global Employability University Survey, now published annually (Bothwell, 2016), highlights how several universities have risen up the rankings by enhancing their links with external organisations and establishing a variety of student experiences with those organisations. These initiatives may involve periods abroad, working in start-ups, internships, attending classes on entrepreneurship, working in teams upon return, preparing e-portfolios, guest speakers and discussions with alumni for example, and it is worth noting that they often also have preparatory sessions before such assignments.

Employers' satisfaction with higher education in their country varies internationally, but it is noteworthy that Russia is well-placed in Europe, alongside Switzerland, with only the UK being more highly ranked. Therefore, it is clear that Russia is already well placed with employers in Russia and, outside of Europe, bettered only in USA, Canada, India and Singapore. Nevertheless, Russia may be less well placed with international employers and so lessons can almost certainly be learnt from these others nevertheless.

A majority of employers highlight in the survey that it is important for universities to develop closer relationships with them, an inference being that this will help enhance its graduates' employability. Employers highlight three priorities when selecting graduates; their skills, their professional experience and their subject knowledge. Clearly the first two will be boosted from the links that the university establishes with external organisations and the third, although academic in nature, can also benefit as the potential application of such knowledge may become more apparent for the students involved. Interestingly, grades are ranked relatively lowly overall, although slightly higher in Asia Pacific than Europe or the Americas.

Employers have also developed a set of criteria that they use to select which universities they prefer to recruit from. Not surprisingly, their past experience with graduates of that university is the principal driver, and this is followed in its top-five criteria by the university's subject expertise, its international exposure, its reputation and its production of ready-to-work graduates.

The overall global ranking of universities for employability is illustrated in Table 1, with three Russian universities ranked; two in Moscow and one in Saint Petersburg.

Table 1. Global ranking of top universities on employability

Country	Universities in top 150		Region			
USA	39	26.0%	North America (47)	31%	Americas (49)	33%
Canada	6	4.0%				
Mexico	2	1.3%				
Brazil	2	1.3%	South America (2)	1%		
UK	12	8.0%	Western Europe (60)	40%	Europe (63)	42%
France	11	7.3%				
Germany	8	5.3%				
Switzerland	6	4.0%				
Netherlands	4	2.7%				
Sweden	4	2.7%				
Spain	3	2.0%				
Italy	3	2.0%				
Belgium	3	2.0%				
Denmark	2	1.3%				
Ireland	1	0.7%				
Norway	1	0.7%				
Finland	1	0.7%				
Austria	1	0.7%				
Russia*	3	2.0%	Eastern Europe (3)	2%		
China	7	4.7%	East Asia (23)	15%	Asia (28)	19%
Hong Kong	4	2.7%				
Taiwan	3	2.0%				
Japan	5	3.3%				
Korea	4	2.7%				
India	3	2.0%	South Asia (5)	3%		
Singapore	2	1.3%				
Australia	5	3.3%	Oceania (6)			4%
New Zealand	1	0.7%				
Israel	3	2.0%	Middle East (4)			3%
Saudi Arabia	1	0.7%				
	150		Regions			100%
*The three Russian universities in the global top 150 rankings are: 127 – Lomonosov Moscow State University. 142 – Saint Petersburg State University. 147 – Bauman Moscow State Technical University.						

It is clear that pockets of best-practice exist around the world when it comes to producing graduates with suitable employability attributes. Indeed Russia itself has three of the top universities and much could possibly be learnt from their successes and plans for the future. Although Western Europe (40%) and North America (31%) account for the bulk of the list, the balance across each of these regions is changing, with Canada growing as USA declines for example. Also, Asia is rising rapidly, while Eastern Europe and the Middle East have established a notable presence.

Opportunities for Russia

There are several opportunities for Russian universities to enhance their graduates' employability attributes and so continue to rise up rankings such as these. As outlined in Table 2, three particular options appear to be worth exploring further; collaborations with universities in the USA, particularly as relationships potentially warm in the President Trump era, in Europe through the Erasmus+ scheme, and building further upon the more recent, though burgeoning, BRICS grouping, where collaborative opportunities may arise in Brazil, India, China and South Africa.

Table 2. Opportunities for Russian universities to enhance graduate employability

Potential collaborative groupings for Russia		
Grouping	Universities	%
USA in the President Trump era	39	26%
European Erasmus+ scheme	60	40%
BRICS (Brazil; Russia; India; China; South Africa)	22	15%
Total	121	81%

As an example of a collaborative structure (O'Leary, 2015b), the Erasmus scheme in Europe gives higher education students the opportunity to transfer abroad for a part of their degree programme, has been in place for over 25 years and has now been expanded into Erasmus+ to include a broader range of the youth population (European Union, 2016) in education, training and sport. An evaluation of its impact on graduate employability and internationalisation of higher education institutions (Brandenburg et al, 2014) concludes with several key findings; employability enhancement is one of the principal motivations for students; participants have better employability attributes than other students, are more flexible and mobile and are significantly less prone to periods of no employment; and employers are attracted to the skills developed, such as openness to new challenges, confidence and tolerance towards others. In the USA, the US Department of Education (2012) placed economic competitiveness as the principal driver for its international strategy, and higher education has focused its Generation Study Abroad initiative on enhancing graduate employability.

Conclusions

Although Russia faces several economic and other challenges at present, this research suggests that the quality of its graduates and their potential impact on the national economy in the medium and longer term is worth considering for further investment to help achieve future prosperity. Part of that objective may be addressed by the effective development of graduate attributes through establishing further links between universities and external organisations as a platform for the student experience. Such partnerships offer students an opportunity to develop their employability attributes and also offer employers the chance to assess potential recruits, as well as to tackle ongoing issues within their organisation. This can be of benefit to all parties involved; the employers, the students and their higher education institutions. Issues to consider when exploring the introduction of externally-focused initiatives include; embedding the initiative into the curriculum; considering delivery through a combination of academics and professionals; cross-faculty opportunities; finding collaboration partners; students working in groups and teams as well as individually; and the output required.

Opportunities to collaborate with other universities exist globally through, for example, the Erasmus+ scheme in Europe, the Generation Study Abroad initiative in the USA and via initiatives underway in the BRICS consortium of rapidly developing nations. These

three options alone house over 80% of the top-ranked universities worldwide for employability and such collaborations could help establish further seeds of economic growth in Russia, building further upon the foundations already established.

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