

EDUCATIONAL FAILURE OF RUSSIAN STUDENTS AS A PROBLEM OF UNIVERSITY MANAGEMENT

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Abstract

One of the most acute problems of Russian higher education is the increasing educational failure of students. Its manifestations are weak educational motivation, poor preparation for student studies, low academic performance, lack of professional orientation, professional self-determination and interest in research. One of the reasons for this phenomenon is the low attention paid to it by University management. The purpose of the article is to show the role of University management in overcoming student educational failure. Research result: 1. The interpretation of students' educational failure is given as a measure of the discrepancy between their personal achievements and public expectations from their activities in the field of higher education. 2. The main signs and reasons for students' educational failure are shown. 3. The reasons for the low interest of University management in the problem of educational failure of students are determined. 4. The main principles of University management work with unsuccessful students are formulated. According to the author, working with unsuccessful students should be a special strategy for university managers aimed at improving the quality of students' human capital.

Key words: university management, students, educational failure, human resources, human capital

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Introduction

The results of research on the quality of Russian higher education show a tendency to increase the number of unsuccessful students [Denisova-Schmidt et al, 2015; Zavadskaya, 2011; Zborovsky et al, 2019]. This trend is not unique to Russian universities. It worries teachers and University leaders in many countries [Habley et al, 2012; Tinto, 2004; Ajjawi et al, 2019]. However, the problem of Russian universities is the refusal of University management to recognize the phenomenon of educational failure of students. Accordingly, managers do not develop effective measures to reduce the number of unsuccessful students.

The purpose of the article is to argue for the need to develop a management strategy in Russian universities to overcome the educational failure of students. The main objectives of the study were: 1) sociological interpretation of the problem of educational failure of students and the prerequisites for its rise; 2) identification of the reasons for the lack of university management attention to the problem of educational failure; 3) characteristics of the principles of activities of University management to overcome the educational failure of students.

In developing the theoretical and methodological framework of the study, we relied on the results of research on various aspects of educational failure. According to researchers, students' educational failure occurs in a broad social, economic, and cultural context. The prerequisites for its emergence are inequality in education [Liu et al, 2020; Hsin, 2020; Zakharov, 2020], lack of parental and public investment in early and school-age education [Heckman et al, 2001], poor quality school education [Barro, 1991]. The effect of these factors is enhanced by the psychological characteristics of the individual and the pedagogical environment in universities [Icekson et al, 2020; Busato et al, 2000]. In some studies on supporting unsuccessful University students, the role of management is sometimes mentioned [Goggin et al, 2016]. Foreign authors believe that University management is by silent interested in solving the problem of students' educational failure and is making efforts to do so. In Russian universities, the situation is different, and this topic is almost not considered in the studies. This circumstance determines the relevance of our research.

1 Methods

The empirical basis of the article was the results of research in 2016-2019. All of them were devoted to the problems of higher education in Russia and in the Ural Federal district. The article uses the results of the projects:

1. Semi-formal expert interviews with heads and teachers of Ural universities (n=80 in 2016; n=30 in 2019). In 2016 the guide interview included a block of questions on problems of University management. A secondary analysis of the interview data was carried out. In 2019 interview focused exclusively on the problem of student educational failure. The selection of experts in organizations was carried out in accordance with two criteria: work experience in the field of education for at least 10 years and the availability of the necessary competencies (knowledge and experience) to evaluate education from certain disciplinary positions (pedagogy, psychology, social psychology, sociology, economics).

2. Secondary analysis of the data of questionnaire survey of students (7 universities of the Ural Federal district, 2019, n=368 people, quota sample). The quota sample formed on the basis of statistical data on students of the city was realized. Quotas were carried out in the areas of training (engineering, natural science, humanities, social and economic), levels of training (bachelor's degree, specialty, master's degree), types of universities.

2 Results and Discussion

2.1 Educational failure of students and its causes

The educational failure of students is a measure of the discrepancy between their personal academic achievements and the public expectations of their studies in higher education. Signs of educational failure are academic failure, lack of positive educational motivation, and lack of interest in research. Table 1 shows that the majority of students are not particularly eager to study. Only 8.3% of students constantly participate in research, including grants, initiative projects. 33% of respondents do this situationally, limiting themselves to writing small articles and conducting micro-studies in the framework of coursework and final qualifying works. 58.5% of students of provincial universities do not participate in scientific work at all.

Tab. 1: The relation of students to the knowledge obtained at the University, in % of the number of respondents

<i>What is your attitude to the knowledge that can be obtained in University?</i>	%
I highly appreciate this knowledge, I try not to miss the opportunity to engage in science and self-education	29,4
I am quite satisfied with the knowledge that I get during lectures, seminars, practice	48,2
The knowledge that I get in University does not matter for my future life and work, it is enough to get a diploma	13,0
Difficult to answer	9,4
Total	100,0

Source: data of the authors' survey

Unsuccessful students are not ready for autonomous organization of educational labor, high-quality work with literature, sources of information, analytical work. They are experiencing difficulties of professional self-determination and negative emotions (resentment, dissatisfaction, uncertainty, etc.). They have predisposition of students to academic deviations (academic cheating behavior). All these characteristics of educational failure reduce the ability of students to master the educational program.

Based on the analysis of transcripts of interviews with University teachers, the most significant risks of students' educational failure were identified. These included: difficulties of employment and self-realization in the profession, lack of attitudes to inclusion in continuing education, and precarization of work. The risks of universities themselves are, first of all, in reducing the quality of higher education and the confidence in it of stakeholders (employers and parents). Here is an excerpt from the interview: *«We are now in the public space, and this is all becoming obvious. We see that this University receives bad students and graduates bad specialists. Who would want their child to study at such a University?»* (A.N., associate professor).

Expert interviews allowed us to identify and systematize the reasons for students' educational failure. The psychological block included: cognitive and motivational deficits, weak natural abilities, low self-esteem, and lack of communicative competence. The experts identified the following social reasons: a system of values that does not correspond to educational activities, a lack of cultural and social capital due to the influence of the family, flaws in school education, the negative influence of the nearest environment and the media on the educational attitudes and behavior of students. Economic reasons for educational failure can be considered a lack of investment in additional education, which forms educational and non-educational skills and allows to increase the level of readiness to study at the university.

Summarizing the interview materials allowed us to single out the reasons for educational failure related to the management of higher education and university management in a separate group. Experts attributed selective state policy in the field of higher education to this group. On the one hand, this policy builds a system for selecting capable, talented, and successful young people for Russia's leading universities. On the other hand, this policy contributes to the concentration of problem youth in provincial universities. Public investment is mainly directed to support those universities where successful students study.

Universities that work with problem students are subject to repressive measures: their state funding is reduced, universities are assigned the status of ineffective, they may face being deprived of state accreditation, or joining another university. In the context of this policy, universities are forced to find ways to solve the problem of educational failure of students. Accordingly, university management becomes a hostage to this situation. The search for ways to solve the problem depends on their attitude to the problem itself, social responsibility and professional culture.

2.2 Reasons for the low interest of University management in the problem of educational failure of students

The first reason is institutional trap of per capita financing. In the conditions of budget per capita financing of educational organizations, University management is interested in maintaining the student body at all costs. The dropout of students due to academic failure threatens the University with a reduction in the state task and a reduction in the rates of teachers.

This situation leads to the emergence of a policy of «student savings» in Russian universities. Its depravity consists in several negative effects. First of all, there is a conflict between university administrators and teachers. The former insist on retaining unsuccessful students at all costs, including by reducing teaching requirements and imitating academic performance. One of the examples was given by our informant in his interview: *«When a teacher at our faculty comes to a group of the weakest students, they master half the material with them, and the requirements have to be lowered, otherwise they will not pass the exam. And for this management will not say thank you» (O.P., teacher).*

Teachers who strive to maintain a high quality of education and faithfully perform their duties are constantly under pressure from the administration, are subjected to checks, manipulations with the help of fear of dismissal: *«I have a lot of friends at different universities, they tell me that at rectorial meetings the question is put directly: think about how not to expel, give the teachers the installation – no deductions, pull» (S.N., professor, director of the institute).*

In addition, the policy of «student savings» «corrupts» students. Many unscrupulous unsuccessful students take advantage of the situation and imitate learning. They often resort to academic fraud without any fear – they order works, copy them, and use plagiarism techniques. Here is an excerpt from the interview: *«For our University, the key parameter is the retention of the contingent. The student did not pass the practice – the teacher is accused. Previously, the student was subject to sanctions, it was important for him to comply with the deadlines. And now the expulsion does not frighten them. Because they know that they will keep it until the last moment» (E.G., professor).*

For conscientious students, this situation serves as a demotivating factor, since with different efforts and contributions, all students (conscientious and dishonest) receive equal remuneration for their academic work (positive grades, diploma). Thus, the university management itself creates conditions for maintaining the educational failure of students. It is no accident that there is a saying in the university community: *«Some pretend to teach, others*

pretend to learn». And university management recognizes this situation as normal and does not identify it as a problem of educational failure of students.

The second reason is the distance of university management from the real educational process. University management in Russian universities is currently at the first stage of professionalization. Many administrators came to universities from government agencies, business structures. Therefore, a large proportion of administrators are staff who are distanced from the daily practices of teaching students and are not involved in solving everyday problems of education. To measure the quality of education, the university administration uses formal tools that are not able to identify the extent and nature of students' educational failure.

Distancing of university management from the educational everyday reality entails distancing from the problem of educational failure of students: *«When I said in the training Department that I read the student's work 10 times and the work is still bad, they did not understand me. They twirled their fingers at their temples: we need to write a report, and you and your debtors are delaying us»* (N.S., associate professor). University management does not create conditions for working with unsuccessful students. There is no specially organized psychological, pedagogical, and social support for unsuccessful students in higher education institutions. There are no psychological assistance programs, and no hours are allocated for additional classes and consultations. At the same time, responsibility for the quality of education is shifted to teachers. This means that teachers have to use their own resources – professional and temporary – to solve this problem. As an argument, we will give a fragment of the transcript: *«A lot of some unreasonable things are done in the management of education. This is not only about per capita funding of universities, but also about rapid changes in educational standards, about endless bureaucracy. All this does not reflect well on the quality of the teacher's work. There is no time for good work with students, no time for self-education»* (I.A, professor).

The third reason is overestimation of the importance of university management and inadequate criteria for evaluating its effectiveness. During the transition to the entrepreneurial model of the university in Russian higher education, educational activities entered into competitive relations with other areas of activity – research, entrepreneur, and public. Unfortunately, education is losing out in this competition. The contribution of University management to the results of higher education activities is measured by the amount of attracted funding, the university's promotion in national and international rankings, the number of grants and joint projects with industrial partners.

Among the criteria for evaluating university management, the educational component is present, but it is minimal and does not reflect the number of unsuccessful students. The most commonly used indicator is the quality of university admissions. Accordingly, the effectiveness of management is measured by the quality of students' human capital, which the university did not actually participate in creating. The quality of university admissions is determined by the results of the Unified State Exam, which many experts doubt is representative today.

Thus, solving the problem of educational failure of students is not among the priorities of university management. In setting these priorities, the administration of universities focuses on the goals of public policy in higher education, rather than on the interests of the academic community. For Russian professors, the real preservation of the quality of university education is the main goal. However, their opinion is not taken into account.

The management staff of universities has become a special group with broad powers and capabilities. The feeling of self-sufficiency leads managers to realize the self-sufficient nature of management activities. Due to the established authoritarian style of higher education management and management in universities, management does not need to know and take into account the opinions of educational communities of teachers and students. It only informs them of its policies and instructions in the form of regulations. The «vertical of power» allows university management to ignore the problem of educational failure.

2.3 The main principles of activities of management to overcome the educational failure of students

Summarizing the materials of expert interviews allowed us to formulate several principles for organizing interaction between University management and the academic community to overcome educational failure. The *first principle* is to include the problem of students' educational failure in the management «agenda» and discuss it jointly with teachers and students. Here is the expert's opinion: «*We can not be silent about this problem. The university management needs to discuss and solve it together with teachers and unsuccessful students. Without this, nothing can be achieved*» (N.V., professor). This approach will help to focus management decisions on the real interests of students and teachers.

The *second principle* is equal attention to all groups of students – successful and unsuccessful. In current conditions, every student is valuable. Support for talent is necessary, but should not exclude support for unsuccessful students. Here is a short excerpt from the interview: «*As a teacher, I can't leave those students who were unsuccessful in adaptation. ... It is unacceptable for me to engage in selection. I understand that there are gifted students and*

there are non-gifted students. The fact that the University has such selection mechanisms is not the norm for me» (A.V., associate professor, curator of the academic group). University management should initiate the elaboration of strategies and approaches to organizing the training of unsuccessful students. Developing flexible educational trajectories for different groups of students will help them move from failure to success. Experts called the organizational conditions for this approach the creation of technologies for pedagogical and psychological support of unsuccessful students, the introduction of motivational programs, individual and group curation.

The third principle is to develop adequate criteria for evaluating the effectiveness of teachers and administrators who work with unsuccessful students. In Russian universities, the current systems for evaluating the effectiveness of teachers' work (for example, indicators of effective contracts) are focused on the educational and scientific achievements of only successful students. Meanwhile, experts believe: *«If a teachers work with a problem group, the results of their work are not evaluated in any way. At the same time, such work actually makes a serious contribution to the development and preservation of University students and should be encouraged accordingly»* (E.Sh., associate professor). Support of unsuccessful students should be allocated to a separate area of educational and managerial activities of the University.

The fourth principle is the exclusion of educational imitations from management and training practices that allow hiding, but not solving, the problem of educational failure. This principle allows you to create a realistic picture of the situation at the University, diagnose the student community, and elaborate an adequate management strategy for its development. In formulating this principle, we agree with the following expert opinion: *«A large number of universities simply do not recognize their low results. They live with their "high" achievements, but in fact it turns out that these results are low for employers! The problem is that the management is afraid of sanctions, the threat of obtaining the status of an ineffective University. Hence, there is a desire to imitate success, and not to show honestly their low results»* (S.S., professor). All four of these principles are, in our opinion, the basis for improving the activities of University management. They will allow to make adequate management decisions to overcome the educational failure of students.

Conclusion

Educational failure of students is a problem not only for the students themselves, their parents, and teachers. It is a key problem of modern university management. The quality of university

management is determined by its ability to find an effective solution to this problem, to include it in the policy agenda at the level of the university and the entire higher education system.

The research allowed to show the role of university management in overcoming student educational failure. This role is primarily to diagnose the extent and nature of students' educational failure. It means that this problem is included in the priorities of the management strategy for the development of educational activities of the university. University management, solving the problem of educational failure of students, implements the mission of a socially responsible Institute. Its actions in this case minimize the risks for society, the labor market, and employers that are produced by the educational failure of students.

In this article, we have identified the reasons for the lack of attention of the management community of Russian universities to the problem of educational failure. This made it possible to justify the need to change the principles of University management and the main directions of its activities. We also tried to show the need for close interaction between university management and the academic community in finding solutions to the problem under discussion.

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