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Student employment in Russia: incidence, motivation and labour market outcomes

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During last two decades there has been a rapid massification of higher education in Russia, mainly due to the growth of private universities, and programs in business, economics, law and social sciences. Higher education enrollment rose from 30% of high school graduates in late 1980s to 60–70% in 2018. This massive expansion of higher education has led to a differentiation of higher ed-

ucation by quality and a decrease in the significance of a university degree as a signal on graduate abilities in the labour market. Employers hiring recent university graduates face uncertainty about their productivity and since a degree is no longer a signal of abilities due to the relatively low average standards of education. Other factors, such as work experience, have become important signals of graduate abilities. The mismatch of educational programs to labour market requirements and the importance of practical and soft skills for employment also create demand for work experience before graduation. From the viewpoint of employers, the most employable graduates are those with work experience or/and a degree from a leading university. Consequently, since work experience accumulated during studies has become an important comparative advantage in the labour market and due to the relatively low workload during studies, Russian higher education students actively combine study and work. This article considers the incidence, motivation and determinants of student employment while studying and the educational and labour market outcomes of student employment.

Incidence and patterns of student employment while studying

Combining study and work in Russia is a very wide-spread phenomenon. According to the data of a Russian Federal Statistics nation-wide survey of university graduates [1], around 40% of university students in 2010–2015 combined study and work. A survey of university students, carried out by Ministry of Education and Science of Russian Federation and HSE University (MEMO survey), [2] indicated that during the period 2010–2018 the share of students who combined study and work in Russia lay between 47 and 54%, with increases in periods of economic growth or recovery and declines during recessions.

The distinctive feature of student employment in Russia is that unlike in many European countries, students in Russia tend to combine studies with qualified jobs related to their specialization and by this complement their formal education with practical skills relevant for the labour market. Graduates of the most selective universities combined study and work even more often than students from less selective or regional universities mainly due to the fact that selective universities appear in most developed areas with developed labour markets with plenty of jobs including distant and part-time. According to an HSE University graduate survey [3], around 80% of students had obtained work experience during their studies.

The incidence of student employment while studying differs considerably by degree: among BA and Specialist students, around 47% combined study and work and among MA students around 75%. On average, students dedicated 26 hours per week to paid work, which is 2/3 of average working week. Master's students worked even more: around 30 hours a week. The majority of students start their employment in the 3rd year of their studies.

Motivation and determinants of student employment

There are two main motivations for student employment: financial and labour market motivations (to obtain work experience, job search or job matching motivation). Current research shows that in West European countries and the US, the main motivation for student employment is financial. The massification of higher education contributed to the enrollment of students from diverse socio-economic backgrounds, who need to work to support families, maintain living standards or even pay tuition fees. In the Western world, student employment while studying is more of a negative signal for employers as it indicates that student is likely to represent a low-income family and did not dedicate time enough to his/her studies.

On the contrary, in the countries of Eastern Europe and Russia a significant motivation of student employment while studying is related to the accumulation of work experience, which is valued by employers after graduation. That is why Russian students tend to combine studies with qualified jobs related to their field of study and many of them continue this particular job after graduation. According to a Russian student survey (MEMO), labour market motivation is important for 70% of students. By obtaining work experience, students may signal their ambitions and abilities to potential employers and accumulate practical and soft skills. As a result, the specific form of gradual school-to-work transition (studying, then combining study and work, then working) is very common in Russia. Research on patterns of student employment in Russia shows that students of more selective universities are more likely to combine study and work but tend to work less intensively compared to students from other universities.

Educational and labour market outcomes of student employment

Empirical studies on the educational outcomes of student employment in Russia have not found a significant impact of student employment on academic achievement, except for PhD students. This can be explained by the relatively low workload, the fact that students start to combine studies and work in their 3rd year, after the majority of the most difficult courses have been passed, and by the fact that students tend to combine studies with part-time jobs. Study in many MA programs is designed to let students combine studies even with full-time jobs (low educational workload, evening classes).

Studies on labour market outcomes of student employment shows that there is a significant wage premium for combining study and work for recent university graduates. Students who gained work experience during their studies earn 26–40% more than those who did not. There is also evidence that the intensity of student employment is positively correlated with the early-career wages of graduates.

This analysis shows that student employment does not seem to have significant short-term negative consequences but is a way for students and employers to adjust to the

inefficiency of the educational system and its relatively low standards of quality and incoherence to the requirements of the labour market. By combining study and part-time work students obtain soft skills and the knowledge necessary for performing their jobs; employers receive better trained graduates, who are more familiar with labour market requirements, and universities receive more students who have lower opportunity costs as they can combine work and studies. However, this steady state is not optimal as it leads to extensive public and private monetary and non-monetary educational spending and even if it does not affect academic achievement, it is likely to affect the quality of education and the accumulation of human capital, and by this may have negative consequences in the long-run and may need to be improved.

Summary

More than half of Russian university students combine study and work and dedicate on average 2/3 of their working week to paid work. A significant motivation for employment while studying, in addition to financial motivation, is the necessity to obtain work experience, which is valued by employers as an additional signal of the abilities of university graduates and their soft skills. Student employment does not considerably affect academic achievement due to the relatively low educational workload and the limited intensity of student employment. There is a significant and large positive effect of student employment on salaries of graduates in the early stages of their careers.

Notes

[1] Survey of employability of tertiary education graduates - https://rosstat.gov.ru/free_doc/new_site/population/trud/itog_trudoustr/index.html

[2] Monitoring of Education Markets and Organizations - <https://memo.hse.ru/>

[3] Center for Institutional Research. - https://cim.hse.ru/en/alumnisurvey_en

Working or learning? The Cases of Hungary, Romania, Ukraine, Slovakia and Serbia

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