

# Student Employment in Vocational and Higher Education in Russia

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The combination of studies and work by the vocational education students which is the start of a professional trajectory for many, is discussed in this article and compared with the situation in the higher education system.

To begin with, a few key points should be highlighted about vocational education in Russia, since research is more often focused on either higher education or school education, while vocational education is ignored or used as a basis for comparison, although the number of the vocational education and higher education system graduates among young people under 30 is almost equal. In other words, these represent two equally important population groups for the education system, for the labour market, and for the state as a whole.

Vocational education trains workers, employees, as well as mid-level professionals, and the share of students in the qualified worker professions has fallen significantly over the past fifteen years (from 45% in 2005 to 17.2% of all vocational students in 2019). Where do graduates of the vocational education system work?

Graduates of vocational education often have to compete with university graduates. There is a range of professions that are filled equally by young people with a university degree and with vocational training. For example, construction and manufacturing plant foremen, secretaries and accountants, teachers in primary and preschool education. This comparison is of course based only on the job titles, while the content and professional responsibilities may vary greatly, as do the educational requirements of the applicants.

## Key Premises

There are several premises that are important for understanding the context of students combining work and study. First, according to the data of Monitoring of Education Markets and Organizations (MEMO) [1], families of students in vocational education are usually less educated and less financially secure than families of university students.

The education of the vast majority of vocational education students is state funded. According to federal statistics, more than half of the students in the higher education system study on a fee-paying basis, while only one in every six vocational students pays for his or her education. The

main reason is the low income of vocational students' families. This usually forces students to choose educational programmes where they can study for free, rather than those that are of particular interest to them.

The third important factor impacting the employment of students in vocational education is the early choice of their educational trajectory. They need to decide in the ninth grade, while future university students have two more years left. The lack of, or highly skewed, knowledge of the labour market at this age may lead to early disillusionment with the choice of educational trajectory.

## Student Employment

After outlining these three important premises, the combination of study and work can be discussed directly. The majority of students in vocational education start their studies immediately after the ninth grade (74%), meaning that they are 15 to 16 years old, which significantly limits the opportunities for employment in the first years of study; this is important to consider when comparing the employment data of university students. According to the results of the MEMO, about half of students (44% in vocational education vs. 55% in higher education in 2015) gain work experience by the end of their studies, while according to Rosstat, much fewer 2010–2015 graduates combined study and work (21.9% in vocational education and 36.7% in higher education).

However, the proportion of those who gain work experience related to their profession is extremely low (According to federal statistics, 10% of all vocational education graduates in 2010–2015). While studying and holding down a job not related to their profession, a student accumulates specific knowledge and skills that may not be required for a potential job in his or her professional area. Thus, the transition to a job in the student's field of study is associated with costs (in terms of remuneration, the need to retrain, etc.) that not everyone will be ready to bear. This means that if a student has been working for several years in a job that is not related to his or her education, then only entry-level positions in their field of study will be available to him or her upon graduation.

## Conclusion

If the choice of the area of work is based on a student's personal preferences about his or her future employment or educational trajectory, then no problem exists. However, the choice of employment is often made under the pressure of external circumstances, be it a difficult financial situation or lack of offers in the professional field of interest. As a result, students choose jobs based on the salary, rather than on their relevance. All these considerations are also valid for university students from low-income families.

Students in vocational education and higher education lack reliable information about what is happening in the labour market, i.e. what prospects they will face after graduation or what skills and knowledge are in demand. One way to deal with the lack of such information is to raise their awareness. Students can be taught how to use

job search websites and given basic skills that are necessary for a successful job search, such as, how to write a CV, how to compose a cover letter, how to search for vacancies, how to prepare for a job interview. Naturally, all these skills are not directly related to the profession or field of study, but without these skills, the chances of a student finding a suitable job that would require the skills and competencies acquired during education are reduced. Graduates of vocational education often cannot afford a lengthy search for a suitable job for financial reasons. This is why a vocational graduate is forced to accept the first job offers received while focusing on the promised salary, and not on employment in his or her area of study or career prospects. In fact, without the simple, perhaps auxiliary, but still very necessary skills, the employment effectiveness of graduates and, therefore, the effectiveness of education as a whole, suffers.

## Notes

[1] For more details on the methodology and questionnaires, visit <https://memo.hse.ru>

# To work or not to work during a PhD?

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A critical number of highly skilled graduates is considered a necessary condition for innovation, technological development, and economic growth. Nevertheless, despite the increasing number of PhD holders, a large proportion of PhD students do not make it to their thesis defense. The share of Russian PhD graduates who defended their thesis within the expected period has been steadily decreasing since 2007. Prior to then it was stable at around 30%.

In 2019, the dropout rate hit an all-time high, with 89.5% of graduates not defending their thesis on time. There are not many studies of dropout factors in Russia but public discussion views doctoral student employment, caused by low financial support, as one of the key reasons for the high dropout rate. Despite the widespread belief about the negative effects of employment on graduation outcomes, there is no empirical evidence for such a conclusion. This study investigates how student employment and the balancing of work and study relate to doctoral experience and graduation outcomes.

## Student employment and studying process

In order to investigate the relationship between student employment and studying process we analyzed the data from a 2016 survey of PhD students at leading Russian universities [1]. The aim of this cross-sectional study was to assess the extent and types of their employment, their experiences of balancing work and study, and the main challenges that confront them. We explore how such factors as the place of employment, the type of contract, and the nature of the job affect their academic performance and professional experience.

The survey showed that 90% of doctoral students combine study with work. The most common type of employment is full-time work off-campus (34%). The place of employment has a significant correlation with career prospects. There are more PhD students planning to pursue an academic career among those who have a full or part time job at a university. The sphere of employment plays significant role in student perceptions of studying and university services. Students employed on-campus are more satisfied and have less difficulties with combining study and work. Those employed off-campus reports more difficulties and lower levels of satisfaction with the services provided by their university. Usually there is little connection between their jobs and their thesis topics, which can negatively affect their study. These students also see their supervisors less often. Most of these students plan to pursue a non-academic career after their graduation and the share of those who do not plan to defend their thesis is also higher in this group.

## Student employment and graduation outcomes

The studying process is different for PhD students with different employment characteristics. But do these students differ in their graduation outcomes? To answer this question we collected a longitudinal dataset on doctoral students who studied at HSE University between 2008 and 2017 [2]. The dataset combines data collected during doctoral training and administrative data about students' outcomes, gathered in 2018, after graduation. The final dataset consists of 655 doctoral students. To characterize the relationship between graduation outcomes and student employment, a logistic regression was used with graduation outcomes (defense or dropout) as the dependent variable.

Only 36% of students had defended their thesis by 2018. Other students graduated without a defense (30%), were dismissed (19%), or withdrew before graduation (15%). Most doctoral students who get their degree defend their thesis within the expected period (4 or 5 years) or the year after (78% of full-time students and 79% of part-time students). Theoretically, a student can work on their thesis after withdrawal, but this is quite rare. The share of PhDs among those who graduated is much higher than among those who were dismissed or left the program (55% vs 5%). 39% of full-time students defended their thesis compared to only 29% of part-time. There are no differences