

Comparative Analysis of State and Non-State Higher Educational Institutions in Terms of their Adaptation to New Societal Conditions in Post-Soviet Russia

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Abstract: The present paper investigates post-Soviet non-state and state higher educational institutions in terms of students' perceptions of school curriculum, quality of teaching, available educational resources and overall organization in their higher educational institutions.

When a country changes its mode of government, political paradigms, social institutions and relations, education and training may not only underlie the impact of economic, political and social reforms, but also act as important vectors of these reforms. Thus, in the Post-Soviet transition period, the search for the optimal ways for the development of educational system has acquired one of the most acute meanings in the Russian Federation. In addition, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, real opportunities arose to identify issues, conduct research, and initiate critical analyses and creative discussions.

Educational policy in Russia in transition has been extensively studied in recent years by both domestic governmental agencies and such international organizations as UNESCO, World Bank, OECD, and the Council of Europe. It has also become a favorite topic of analysis for a number of independent research projects from Central and Eastern European and Western countries, which have provided outside and inside views on various problems under study. Within the analyses of educational reforms, considerable research has been devoted to the emergence and dynamics of market forces in the Russian education, but little attention has been paid to the development of the non-state sector in education, which emerged as a result of the socio-economic and political transformation of the society.

At the same time, the transformation of the state educational system will be slower and less efficacious if this system will not have to compete with the newly emerging system of non-state education. Today, one can point out concrete examples which prove that well-functioning non-state higher educational institutions (HEIs) have a positive influence upon the nearby state schools. It seems that non-state HEIs can introduce an element of competition into higher education as a whole, indispensable for the development and functioning of any system.

Nevertheless, an exhaustive search of the relevant literature has revealed some problems associated with past attempts to research non-state sector in education in Russia. First, the results of the Western studies (Bialecki, 1996; Gisetski, 1999; Halsey, Lauder & Brown, 1997) cannot be fully applied to the practice of the Russian education. Second, most previous Russian research as presented in some journals are characterized either by a general description of the phenomenon (Kinelev, 1995; Sadovnich, 2000), or limited to a single case study (Krukhmaleva, 1999; Popov, 1999; Smirnov, 1998). Third, most past studies in the field of non-state education have mainly concentrated on the non-state secondary education, while the importance of the study of non-state sector in higher education has been surprisingly underestimated. In particular, Zernov and Barkhatova (1999), Grichshenkova (1994), Krukhmaleva (1999), and Nikiforova (2000) investigated the problems of non-state higher education, but a review of their publications reveals that they have been limited to the problems of necessity for this type of education, its structure, licensing and accreditation, and financing problems. Little is known about the non-

state HEIs' efficiency in terms of adaptation and innovations. Moreover, a comparison of state and non-state institutions of higher education regarding response to the changing society has been disregarded as well.

Purpose

Therefore, the purpose of the present research is to investigate and compare non-state and state HEIs in terms of their adaptation to new societal conditions. The guiding hypothesis is that the newly established non-state HEIs can better contribute to solving problems of higher education in Russia than the traditional state HEIs since the non-state sector in higher education possesses qualities that allow it flexibility to deal with the challenges of the current times and the demands of the future. The following research tasks have been included in the current paper: (a) to examine students' perceptions of their HEI's curriculum, (b) to reveal their attitudes of the quality of teaching, (c) to analyze the availability of the educational resources, and (d) to explore respondents' evaluation of overall organization for both types of higher educational institutions.

Definition

Before discussing the term "non-state higher educational institution," it is worth mentioning that the author finds this term inappropriate since it does not cover the whole content and depth of the phenomenon. In fact, it may even be a false term, as the non-state sector in education solves the state's tasks in specialist training, providing working positions and some others. In the literature, such terms as "non-governmental," "private," and "non-budget" exist. Nevertheless, in the present work, the author has agreed not to contradict this term, since this very term is used in all official Russian documents and governmental decisions as a whole, and the names of the HEIs under study in particular.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for the project was provided by the concept of HEI as a change agent. Education is understood as an open system dialectically connected with the multi-faceted life of the society (Bialecki, 1996; Halsey, Lauder & Brown, 1997; Scott, 2000). Any social institution emerges, develops, functions and changes under the influence of societal conditions. Consequently, the system of higher education transforms in accordance with societal demands, and the structural elements of the system are also determined by the influence of society. Thus, in accordance with the given concept, both traditional and newly established non-state HEIs were examined within new economic, political and socio-cultural contexts of present-day Russia. Specifically, the research argues that when in the 1990s Russia shifted away from the authoritarian, highly centralized and fully state supported system towards the relatively democratic and decentralized system that increasingly relies on the market sources of revenue, it has caused new conditions for the transformations within the system of higher education.

Method

To compare non-state and state HEIs in terms of their adaptation to new societal conditions, questionnaires were distributed and administrated among the students in three state and three non-state HEIs of different ranking (elite, selective and non-selective) located in two cities of Russia, in a capital and a province. Each purposive sample of participants was chosen

from daytime students in their fourth and fifth year of studies* who were considered more familiar with an overall organization of their institutions, and the sample constituted 45 students. All the participants were specializing in social sciences: sociology, political science, social work and psychology. The collected demographic information showed that the student populations of both types of HEIs were generally middle class and engineering and technical intelligentsia regardless of the ranking of an institution they study in. In addition, the demographic information revealed that there was no significant difference in an average age of the students from state and non-state HEIs, which were 22.5 and 23.5, respectively.

Since the author personally explained the questionnaire instructions for the respondents, distributed and collected them during their classes, 262 of 270 students followed the directions and returned the feedback forms, thus making a 97% response rate. Yet due to time constraints, the samples did not include respondents specializing in other disciplines and from other cities. Therefore, any findings or conclusions made in this paper should be regarded as preliminary ones, and this research should be supplemented by a larger and more representative sample.

The first section of the current questionnaire asked for demographic information, namely, name and type of a HEI, age of a respondent and his/her social background. The second section included four basic research tasks focusing on students' perception of school curriculum, quality of teaching, available educational resources and overall organization in their HEIs. Additional analysis was performed regarding students' factors influencing their choice of HEI. Checklists, scaled (Likert) items followed by free responses were used for the research.

Research Findings

An analysis revealed differences between the institutions of higher education under study regarding students' perceptions in the following areas: (a) school curriculum, (b) quality of teaching, (c) available educational resources, and (d) overall organization of the institution.

School Curriculum

The collected data indicated that 65% of the respondents from non-state HEIs agreed on their institution's flexibility and dynamics of reacting to the market changes, while 43% of the state HEIs' students were uncertain about this. In particular, when asked about variety of specializations and number of optional courses offered by their HEIs, 38% of the participated students from non-state and 24% of those from the state HEIs agreed on it. 22% of the participants from non-state HEIs compared to 16% from state ones strongly agreed that in their institution the curriculum could be adapted to meet students' needs. Also, up to 10% of students from both types of institutions disagreed that the curriculum was up to date in their departments.

Giving brief explanations to the statements describing the curriculum of their institutions, most respondents reported that the structural reorganization of higher education corresponded to the new labor market requirements: more specialists were trained in market economy, law, social studies and humanities. The answers of the students from state HEIs showed that their departments of sociology, political science and psychology were opened not long ago, and students from non-state universities demonstrated that their institutions were newly established and were originally oriented towards filling gaps in training areas previously left vacant for ideological reasons and not needed in a planned economy. Comparatively more participants from non-state HEIs commented on a quick reaction of their institutions to the changes in society in

* Note: In Russia there is a 5-year unified system of higher education leading to getting a Diploma that is usually equivalent to a Western Master's degree.

opening majors of interest for the youth; the same number of positive responses came from the students studying in an elite state university.

Quality of Teaching

Perception of quality of students' training is quite contradictory, and it varies greatly from school to school, depending on the respondent and ranking of the HEI. In general, more respondents from both types of HEIs circled the quality of teaching as "good" compared to the percentage of those who marked it "fair." However, even in elite and selective universities, there were 8% of the respondents who rated the quality of teaching in their institutions as "poor," and only 5% of the surveyed students from an elite state HEI indicated it was "very good." Asked why they felt as they did concerning this issue, the participants who were quite satisfied with their training mentioned that their instructors tried to provide up-to-date information on different issues, use innovative approaches and interactive teaching methods, and initiate analyses and discussions. In contrast, some unsatisfied respondents argued that their instructors lacked sufficient knowledge of the subjects taught, were unfamiliar with modern concepts, and were obviously unprepared for their classes. Some students stressed that their instructors still used the same teaching methods they might have applied twenty years ago.

In addition, more students from the non-state HEIs stated that their institutions were more aimed at dialogue with students compared to the traditional authoritarian way still preserved in some state institutions of higher education. These respondents also mentioned that in their institutions, there existed a system of teacher evaluation at the end of the course as well as a competitive selection of the teaching staff, with priority given to the professionalism of a teacher regardless of his/her age and state awards. The participants of the research reported that in their newly established departments, some instructors tried to realize their creative potential by employing new, original and experimental programs and interdisciplinary approaches more often.

Available Educational Resources

Regarding the educational resources available in their institutions of higher education, the research revealed that they were not sufficient for both types of universities. In fact, more students from all types of non-state HEIs and an elite state HEI confirmed that they had some material and technical support for their studies. Particularly, 54% of non-state vs. 38% of state HEI respondents commented on their access to modern textbooks and relevant literature at their institutions. It was also found that more students enrolled in non-state HEIs were provided with handouts for their classes compared to the students from state ones; at the same time, many more students from non-state institutions complained that they had to use other libraries to be prepared for their general courses. Only students from elite non-state and state HEIs stressed that they had free Internet access at their universities. Nevertheless, in the case of a state HEI, the respondents commented that they had to subscribe to Internet access at least five days in advance, and their access was strictly limited by one hour due to an insufficient number of the available computers. Only respondents from elite HEIs confirmed their access to such educational resources as classroom computers and TV and VCRs. All students agreed that they had access to photocopy machines at their HEIs, but added that they were unable to make enough photocopies because of inflated prices.

Overall Organization of the Institution

Evaluation of overall organization of higher educational institutions revealed that most of the students were not satisfied with the way their institutions were managed. There was almost no significant difference in the answers of students from state and non-state institutions: none of

the participants marked the overall organization of their institutions as “very good,” 37% of state and 34% of non-state HEIs’ students considered it as “good,” 59 % of the respondents from state and 61% of those from non-state rated it as “fair,” 4% and 5% circled “poor” for state and non-state institutions correspondingly.

The research on students’ factors influencing their choice of HEI demonstrated that for 22% of the students currently enrolled in non-state HEIs, the basic factor influencing their choice were new specializations and the range of subjects offered by these institutions and the lack of them in local state ones. Simultaneously, 15% reported that they expected non-traditional course organization and equal partnership between staff and students; 5% confessed that they chose a non-state university since they did not want to take entrance examinations necessary to be admitted to the state ones. Furthermore, the paradoxical finding is that despite some advantages to the non-state HEIs discussed above, 68% of students from non-state HEIs indicated they entered this type of institution because they had not been admitted to the state HEIs.

Additionally, when answering the question whether it was prestigious to study at their higher educational institution, 65% of the participants from the state HEIs and only 8% from non-state ones, including those from an elite one, answered positively. Moreover, when all the students, from both state and non-state HEIs, were asked what educational institution they would choose if they had enough money, 61% answered that they would choose a state HEI, 12% a non-state one, 11% had no preferences, and 10% indicated that it was difficult to answer.

Educational Implications and Summary

In conclusion, it can be stated that systemic changes in Russia in the 1990s caused new conditions within education. Many investigators have recently turned to the consequences of commercialization and other market-oriented forces in the system of higher education in the country. This paper has also shed some light on the HEIs’ response to the changing society, and whether the non-state sector in higher education responded to the challenge more positively compared to the traditional institutions of higher education.

The demographic data has shown that the students’ populations of non-state and state HEIs do not differ significantly: most of the students are of the same age, and originate from the similar social backgrounds. Then, the collected data has confirmed a research question that more respondents from non-state HEIs compared to those from the state ones agreed on their institution’s flexibility and dynamics of reacting to the market changes by giving examples on a variety of specializations and number of optional courses. Further, in students’ opinion, the quality of teaching is still an issue of concern for both types of HEIs. However, some respondents considered that it was easier for the instructors to realize their creative potential and employ new and non-traditional content into the educational process in non-state HEIs that sometimes was impossible within the rigid traditional state system of education. Most of the participants of the research showed their dissatisfaction with the technical provisions of the educational process, although some of them stated that, simultaneously with poor quality general libraries, non-state HEIs were more successful in providing students with modern literature and class handouts in the areas of their specialization. Last, despite some recent successes described above, most of the respondents perceive overall organization of their institutions as fair, regardless of its type and ranking; this negative perception of the organization of HEIs should give strong signals to their administration.

Hence, the preliminary hypothesis that the newly established non-state sector in higher education might be flexible in dealing with the challenges of the current times has been partially

confirmed. Nevertheless, the results of additional research on students' factors influencing their choice of a HEI showed that, in spite of some advantages to the non-state HEIs, almost an absolute majority of the students currently enrolled in this type of institutions entered them because they had not been admitted to the state ones; most of the respondents also expressed their desire to study at a state HEI. This finding suggests that probably more time is required for the development of non-state sector in the system of education in Russia and formation of a corresponding public opinion.

The present research was considered as a starting point for further discussion that might contribute to improvement of the educational process in Russia. Possible areas for further research might include new social and pedagogical functions performed by non-state HEIs, the role of non-state HEIs in reforming the system of education in Post-Soviet Russia, and collaboration and cooperation of state and non-state HEIs. In summary, it is noteworthy that diversification of educational systems along with their mutual enrichment and collaboration are a step towards the development and improvement of society in the period of transition.

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