

Shaping Educational Expectations: The Role of the University (Russia – Israel)

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Abstract

This article discusses results obtained during the first stage of a comparative study addressing changes in educational expectations and judgments of students studying at institutions of higher education in Russia and Israel.¹ The study focuses on the relationship between the aforesaid changes and the contents of instruction and the educational process at a specific university. The objective of the research was not only to describe existing expectations and judgments, but also to show how they are formed. Educational expectations depend on numerous factors, ranging from the existing educational experience to the behavior of the job market where the education acquired may be applied.

Keywords: Educational expectations, globalization, transformation, higher education.

¹ The participants of the research project were Yachmenyova Maria (a post-graduate student of sociology), Pechenkina Tatiana (Master of Sociology), and Semyonova Tatiana (a magistrand of the first year at the Department of Sociology) of the Ural State Pedagogical University. During the first stage of the project (2010), the research involved 554 first-year students from the Ariel University Center in Samaria and the Hebrew University in Jerusalem (Israel); 568 first-year students of the Ural State Pedagogical University and the Ural State Medical Academy (Russia, Ekaterinburg). The research included 10 lecturers from Israel and 10 lecturers from Ekaterinburg universities. The information was gathered through two methods – a questionnaire survey (students) and semi-formal interviews (teachers).

Introduction

Among the trends guiding the process of educational transformation, three may be indicated as most significant. First and foremost is the *democratization* (increasing public demand) of higher education. The rising number of young people seeking higher living standards and technological advancement boosts employment levels in sectors dealing with information services and products. Democratization stems from the increased significance of higher education (Bachelor degree programs), which is steadily becoming a "prerequisite" for success in life. In Russia, only secondary vocational education may be perceived as an alternative to higher education, although only to a certain extent.

Another important trend leading to changes in education is related to its *standardization* and *universalization*. This is primarily associated with globalization and may be clearly identified in the concepts and actions of the Bologna process. The increasing mobility of contemporary society calls for one to acquire cross-cultural skills and traditions, necessitating the regular sharing of experiences between students and lecturers from different countries. Standardization serves as the basis for universalization, providing an opportunity to compare and adjust education offered in different countries. Russia and Israel are involved in such a process; the accreditation procedure has become not only part of university life but also a much discussed issue.

Attitudes to the Bologna process are quite controversial; ongoing reforms raise concerns shared by both Russian and Western university instructors.² These concerns are not unfounded, as students' and teachers' mobility, which has not shown any considerable rise in the recent years, is seen as merely a smokescreen, while in fact the main issue is saving on resources and thoughtless "reducing" of educational activities for practical application. The greatest concerns address the destruction of the scientific core of university education; "Research disciplines are turning into empty niches, which – in the context of self-sufficiency – the 'interdisciplinary' university administration is ready to close down as unprofitable."³

Another aspect inherent in the process of shaping education-related expectations is that the contemporary consumer society tends to suggest behavior patterns and determine lifestyles. Education is included in the service package offered by society. Therefore, education-related expectations may be affected by such factors as fashion and prestige. Education is also affected by advertising, which creates a certain image of successful people in the future. People are gradually more inclined to be involved in decisions prioritizing available services, thus influencing the structure of the educational process.

By and large, the expectations of first-year students in regard to higher education do not differ much in both countries. Higher education is significant as it provides students with essential preparation for professional activities and offers an opportunity to become persons of knowledge and keen intellect, while satisfying their need for a better chance of career advancement and personal growth. The overriding objective that is typical of applicants is their interest in training for future professional activities (Ekaterinburg – 73.1% of respondents; Israel – 57.4%). In Israel, students are more focused on developing their personal qualities, enhancing their educational and cultural level, and obtaining better opportunities for career growth (every third student), whereas among Ekaterinburg students the same intentions are shared by every fifth student.⁴ Interestingly, five years ago a similar research showed that students at the UralStatePedagogicalUniversity gave higher scores to these parameters; however, in recent years the pragmatic component of education (the significance of professional training) has become more pronounced.⁵

²Baert P., Shipman A. University under Siege? Trust and Accountability in the Contemporary Academy// European Societies. Vol. 7.No. 1. 2005. pp. 157-185; Senashenko V.S. Concerning Competency Building Approach in Higher Education//Higher Education in Russia. 2009. No.4.

³Bikbov A. Disclosed Plan of the Bologna Reform: At the Dead-Lock of the Bologna Process // Pushkin. – 2009. No.2. pp. 27-30. <http://www.russ.ru/pushkin/Rassekrechennyj-plan-Bolonskoj-reformy>

⁴ Except for the focus on increasing one's educational and cultural level; here the data do not show any difference.

⁵Qualification quality of specialists with the pedagogical diploma: Social Monitoring / Edited by. B.M. Igoshev, L.E. Petrova, L.Ya. Rubina. Ural State Pedagogical University, Ekaterinburg, 2006. – p. 166.

Nevertheless, in our opinion, one of the main consequences of these processes is society's changed attitude towards education. If a university education is a vital need amounting only to practical objectives, this will lead to a dwindling of the so-called intellectual culture, the culture of theoretical learning and the study of reality. The rising number of students, along with employers' pressing demand for "ready-for-service" specialists, frequently place universities in an uncomfortable position, compelling them to place emphasis on training of future employees rather than on academic education that focuses primarily on theory learning and research activities. What bothers university instructors is that scientists and researchers are no longer wanted, while workforce, "craftsters" are sought after. Family traditions in education also testify to this shift and to the prevailing applicative nature of the significance of education.

At the ArielUniversityCenter, approximately one-half of the students' parents do not have a higher education; the same can be said of Ekaterinburg students. However a different picture emerges if the assessment refers specifically to student groups majoring in certain fields of specialization. The UralMedicalAcademy is quite a prestigious educational institution; more than one-half of the parents of medical students have a higher education; this is almost identical for mothers and fathers. The lowest level of parent education is observed at the UralStatePedagogicalUniversity. Considering existing remuneration and status typical of this profession in Russia, the attribute "pedagogical" unfortunately has a negative effect on the appeal of this educational institution. As a result, the student population consists mostly of young people qualified for the "budget" quota, who are interested in taking advantage of free education, despite having demonstrated merely average performance at secondary schools. At the pedagogical university, only the father of every third student has a higher education and the mother of every fourth student has a university diploma.⁶ Thus, for most students, education is initially not a self-contained value, part of their parents' experience and a distinguishing characteristic of their social network. The desire to attain a certain social status and a higher salary level is emphasized. Such an attitude is manifested in students' lack of interest in theoretical subjects and in their demand for an education of a purely practical nature, seemingly in line with employer requirements and objectives of the ongoing reforms, as manifested in their focus on the applicative content of Bachelor degree programs.

However, it is not that simple. One obvious fact is often ignored: Contemporary society is changing rapidly, and not only in terms of technological developments. Moreover, the differentiation of society facilitates such processes as individualization, "erosion" of traditions, and high mobility of the population. All these changes encompass many risks for each individual, turning his or her life into the biography of a tightrope walker.⁷ Here, only education can become a life-line, a secure safety net, by developing abilities that can help one minimize potential risks. The urgent need to understand reality, and the intended and unintended consequences of its changes, and the opportunity to study continuously throughout one's life, give rise to tremendous challenges encountered by universities.⁸ The issue is not the departure from "high" theory, rather the development of educational competence, students' ability to work with any type of information by combining theoretical learning with any and all practical issues related to the application of research findings. In other words, the university's objectives are becoming more complicated, while the qualifications of applicants are making their accomplishment even more difficult.

At the same time, students' expectations and judgments are very dynamic; they tend to change during the educational process, depending on teachers' efforts, the learning environment, opportunities offered by universities in terms of the future profession, career growth, etc. Thus, on the one hand, universities attract young people interested in attaining higher social status; on the other hand, they may encounter problems related to the educational process when students do not have an adequate

⁶ The specifics of the Russian system of education should be taken into consideration; most of the parents who do not have a higher education have a secondary vocational education, as they studied at vocational schools.

⁷ Beck U., Beck-Gernsheim E. Individualization and "Precarious Freedoms": Perspectives and Controversies of a Subject-oriented Sociology // *The Blackwell Reader in Contemporary Social Theory* / ed. by Elliot A. Oxford: Blackwell, 1999. pp.156-167.

⁸ Bernet N. UNESCO and Education: What Should They be Like? // *Higher Education in Russia*. 2008. No.11.

educational capital, which is part of family education. Note that the findings from the first stage of the study show a rather weak relationship between students' grades and their parents' level of education. In this study, the quality of education is analyzed in the context of students' changing expectations and judgments regarding higher education. Therefore, the findings constitute the results of the first measurement. Students' expectations and judgments are assumed to be highly influenced both by specifics of the educational process and by the university environment. For example, students may take a greater interest in research during later years of their university education. Alternatively, they may arrive at the conclusion that during the time spent at university they were able, more or less successfully as compared to their expectations, to learn the basics of a certain profession.

The range of issues related to student expectations and judgments covers almost all aspects of education: formal, non-formal and informal. Hence, along with standard questions on students' expectations of higher education (the focus on acquiring professional skills), the questionnaire includes questions are intended to clarify the meaning of self-research and independent work for students. Presumably, interest in the profession and desire to achieve better results will underlie students' willingness for independent, educational and research work. Questions raised in class can, and ideally must, be discussed further after class.

The survey conducted among first-year students identified the dominant "freshman" culture, in which most respondents needed more detailed and fuller explanations; Therefore, many potential instructor characteristics did not enter the primary list.

Table 1: Significant Characteristics of Teachers: Survey at Three Universities

Significant Characteristics of the Instructor	Ariel University Center	Ural State Medical Academy	Ural State Pedagogical University
Explains everything clearly and in detail	85.4	85.8	82.0
Has professional experience	52.5	43.3	41.8
Is able to understand the student	49.6	63.3	70.4
Gives attention to practical aspects of application of the studied material	36.1	36.3	25.6
Good personal salesmanship	30.3	41.7	38.4
Gives tutorials and advice to students after classes	29.4	45.4	28.7
Places emphasis on controversial issues, seeks opinions	29.4	41.7	38.4

The instructor's attention and his/her ability to understand students are extremely important for students studying at Ekaterinburg universities, considering that they have left school quite recently. Israeli students are slightly more appreciative of the professional experience of their instructors. Ekaterinburg students are more interested in the challenging material that poses problems.

First-year students pay more attention to study contents, professionalism of instructors, and student-teacher relationships – in other words, to everything that constitutes the foundation of educational activities. At the same time, there are some differences: students at the Ural State Pedagogical University pay more attention to study contents and to relationships within the student community, while students at the Ariel University Center tend to be more interested in contents and professionalism; a similar situation is observed among students of the Ural State Medical Academy.

First-year students are interested in lectures (approximately every second student at Ariel and the Ural Pedagogical University), although future health professionals at Ekaterinburg do not seem to share this opinion. They give priority to practical classes. Their interest is encouraged by teachers who see such classes as more effective in terms of professional training. All the students are equally interested in practical training at different organizations. Work such as developing their own projects and participating in scientific research arouses interest only in every tenth student. These proportions are most likely connected to the specific course offered in the first academic year, when emphasis is placed on lectures, thus organizing students' priorities. The medical academy is a good example, as practical classes constitute a major part of studies as early as the first year.

During the second stage of the research, changes in the data may mirror educational practices favored by each university. Three years later, when taking senior courses, students of selected fields of specialization will participate in the survey based on a similar questionnaire. Some other characteristics may prove conspicuous. The resulting picture will help us see the contribution of the university to developing students' educational competence and their interest in research types of educational activity. For example, one question helps assess students' interest in having greater independence when completing different types of university assignments. First-year students expressed such a desire, measured on a scale of 1 to 10. Results were 7.7 (Israel) and 6.7 (Ekaterinburg).⁹ This is quite a high level of potential interest in independent work; the assessment of the actual situation shows only a slight difference, being lower by 0.5-1 points. We assume that after a few years of education, students' quest for independence will not diminish; however, any variations can be interpreted as indicative of teachers' endeavors and the university environment.

Teachers' work - namely, the content of classes, methodology and methods, forms of activities offered to students, modes of communication – has a critical impact on students' opinions on higher education. Institutional demands of their instructors are currently very high: they must be professionals, masters of their craft, educators, and knowledgeable. Working in the university environment, together with their associates, instructors have a team spirit, experience, integrity and self-criticism. Other important qualities include innovativeness, creativity, desire for novelty and new ideas. Students' requirements of teachers are equally high: The teacher must excel in everything, be a theorist, a practitioner, and an educator.¹⁰

Contemporary education increasingly uses concepts such as "competencies" and the "competency-building approach." This new approach, recently introduced into the education field, is proving highly controversial among those working in the education sector.¹¹ Interviews conducted with teachers from Israel and Ekaterinburg show that this terminology has not become a key element of the educational discourse. The impeding factors are different: our own traditions, our own experience of education, adopted criteria for the professional role; Russia wants and needs to avoid any additional strain, in a time of acute shortage of resources (energy, time, etc.). The individualization of education is an inevitable alternative for enhanced quality, as students have different abilities and different potentials. "Being faced with such a mixed bag of clientele, the teacher has to forego any socialized instruction and individualize requirements" maximally."¹² Such practices have already been adopted in western systems, but for most Russian higher schools this problem is almost insolvable. The time scheduled for education at universities cannot be changed (the academic period cannot be extended); the number of optional courses is minimum or zero.

Individualization of education and the competency-building approach call for urgent changes in the regulations governing functions and roles inherent in the system of education, as the established patterns of interaction can no longer persist in its previous form; This situation is typical not only of Russian students and teachers. The customary arrangements and practices are being torn down to be replaced by new ones, not only or mostly through reforms, but due to adjustment of standards to the changing environment. Some want to continue with traditional practices, while others strive for change; this pull-and-push situation provokes a "collision" among specialists. The battle is in full swing not only at university meetings, but also in teachers' minds. Controversial assessments of the

⁹ The applied scale was from 1 ("The teacher explains the objective, gives the theme of the course paper, specifies the structure and the process, and I follow his instructions without stepping aside") to 10 ("I do not need any help in choosing the theme of my course paper, I know how to structure it and how to write it; the teacher helps me with advice, if I have any questions").

¹⁰ These are the data obtained at a group discussion held at the UralStatePedagogicalUniversity's Department of Sociology on March 15, 2011. Participants were 20 students. The subject of the discussion: "What kind of a teacher would you like to see in the classroom?"

¹¹ Krasinskaya L.F. Readiness of teachers for innovative reforms in the higher school // Higher Education in Russia. 2010. No. 6.pp.132-137; Petrunova R.M. The individually targeted organization of the learning process: Illusion and Reality/Higher Education in Russia. – 2005. – No.11. pp. 65-70.

¹² Mayatzky M. From Bologna to Bologna, or the No Way Process// Pushkin. – 2009. No. 2. pp. 23-26. <http://www.russ.ru/pushkin/Ot-Bolon-i-do-Bolon-i-ili-tupikovyj-process>

situation, along with its diverse interpretations, have an adverse impact on the effectiveness of education, thus increasing the need for more active study of educational practices involving students and teachers from other countries and universities in order to develop proposals to optimize efforts and bridge differences.

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