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MODERN CHALLENGES TO DEVELOP EDUCATIONAL SPACE OF A REGIONAL TRANSITIVE UNIVERSITY

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Abstract

The priority task for regional universities is to meet current challenges in order to develop effective educational space at the stage of transformation from a “transit university” to a “transitive university”. In this regard, it is viable to identify crucial problems of the development of a particular regional university from the standpoint of participants in educational interaction. Requirements of external stakeholders and their attitude to transformations of educational space should be articulated. Over a period from April to November of 2018 the authors carried out a field research on the base of Udmurt State University. The research comprised of two parts. The first part involved arranging four focus groups of university students and university faculty, and employers of Udmurt Republic. The second part of the research aimed to hold expert interviews with university administration and directors of the institutes. As discovered from the research results, the key requirement of student community seems to make transformations in educational process, in particular, use of modern interactive, practice-oriented technologies and updated equipment. According to employers, the current situation in the city of Izhevsk, the capital city of Udmurt Republic, literally looks as a deadlock, when neither universities nor city authorities show any interest in cooperation. To sum up the research results on university faculty, most crucial requirement for this group of stakeholders is to review the relations between the employees, that is – university teachers, and the employers, i.e. the university administration.

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Keywords: Transit university, transitive university, regional university.



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1. Introduction

Management of a modern university tends to require administration teams of high professional level that are to provide a competitive edge for the universities; and this is seen to be a priority task for the universities of the 21 century. Apart from their major educational functions, innovative research and enhancement of university culture, today's universities aim to take the role of intermediaries between a numerous stakeholders that requires developing the functions of regional management (Sedlacek, 2013).

Competitive economics of knowledge gives rise to competitive dynamics. Those who are proactive will win in the market environment. The vector of an advanced development implies both technological and humanitarian innovations, the development of a new social environment, new mechanisms of interactions with social actors and new management over this environment, which is indicated as "landscape of higher education".

As recent research shows, being actors of this dynamically changing world, universities have a good potential for a direct and indirect impact on social actors. A direct impact means a real promotion of region's economics by implementing of technological solutions into its infrastructure. Sustainable links of the universities with external agents, which are built up via business incubators, technological parks, science driven units, may encourage innovations and their effective implementations (Diez-Vial & Montoro-Sanchez, 2016). Indirect impact is connected with the development of human capital (Blundell, Dearden, Meghir, & Sianesi, 2005), increasing demand for goods and services of higher qualities (Florida, 2003). Increasing influence of universities on regional economy and its economic growth is proved by a number of research historic retrospective. The sample of 15000 universities from 1500 regions over a period between 1950 and 2010 (Valero & Reenen, 2019) can serve as good example of it.

The development of a modern regional university is underpinned by the effective interactions with regional ecosystem and engages two major levels. The first level is a regional macro environment with regionally- formed specifics. The second one is an organizational level that involves university mesic environment as a complex of internal administrative and managerial resources (McAdam, Miller, & McAdam, 2016).

Challenges to modern regional transitive universities stem from the reputational risks, the risk of increasing competition in dynamic and changing environment and insufficient knowledge of the market. They still remain extremely high. The term "transitive" means "to be in transit, "to be transformative" implying efficiency of new strategic interactions of all regional agents.

According to expert evaluation, modern higher education still contributes relatively efficient into its own development. However, a priority given to market regulations seems a wrong vision because the return on investments in education can be visual, by and large, in the long-term perspective (Marconi, 2018).

2. Problem Statement

The development of Russia's entrepreneurial universities with triple Helix concept where university, industry and government are tied up (Sarpong, AbdRazak, Alexander, & Meissner, 2017), is still associated with a number of serious social and economic problems (Uvarov & Perevodchikov, 2012).

In terms of this, the priority task for regional universities is to meet current challenges in order to develop effective educational space at the stage of transformation from a transit university to a transitive university.

Being unable to compete with leading universities in the ratings of peer groups, regional universities should mobilize all managerial and innovative resources to give rise to transformative and transitive development. The proactive strategy with coherent, systemic and goal-oriented transformations, which is implemented at the internal university level and based on external triple Helix concept, will lead to a sustainable development and form innovative ecosystem. Emerging at the brink of growing external and internal problems ecosystem cannot be exclusive prerogative of university only, it ties up all external agents in the “junction”.

3. Research Questions

In this regard, it is viable to identify crucial problems of the development of a particular regional university from the standpoint of participants in educational interaction. Requirements of external stakeholders and their attitude to transformations of educational space should be articulated.

4. Purpose of the Study

Verification of the main and secondary hypotheses based on the results of the theoretical and methodological analysis of the problem with the data of qualitative expert studies conducted at the regional Udmurt University.

5. Research Methods

Over a period from April to November of 2018 the authors carried out a field research on the base of Udmurt State University. The research was also made within the framework of the research project “Transitive University versus global, national and regional challenges”. It comprised of two parts. The first part involved arranging four focus groups of university students and university faculty, and employers of Udmurt Republic. The second part of the research aimed to hold expert interviews with university administration and directors of the institutes. Theoretical and methodological analysis results allowed the researchers to construct the research model, identify key requirements of the participants of educational space, classify and interpret research findings.

6. Findings

In our previous publications, it was substantiated that a modern university in most Russian regions is a charter research and educational platform, which is a focal point for the subsequent educational and professional migration of students and teachers (Boguslavskiy, Ladyzhets, Neborskiy, & Sannikova, 2018a, 2018b). It attests to the fact that educational, academic, and even technological migrations to more competitive higher education institutions will significantly grow amid tough competition, diversity of university models and restricted resources.

Obviously, to minimize existing and potential negative effects, regional universities will have to build up new scientific and educational policy where the key vector is initiative proactive region-oriented development. To provide an effective achievement of this strategic goal the authors carried out a complete field research aiming to identify existing regional problems and needs of two major groups of participants in university interactions.

The group of internal actors of university interactions involved university faculty and university administration of senior and middle management. The group of external regional stakeholders was made up of employers, NGO representatives, regional authorities, student parents. Here we should take into account the fact that student community is not typical group. Being university applicants they represent external stakeholders whereas with their social role of university students they become internal participants who indirectly influence university policy. Being a university bachelors they also take the role of university applicants seeking better conditions in other universities to enroll in master programs. This seems true in relation to master students. As discovered from the research results, the key requirement of student community seems to make transformations in educational process, in particular, use of modern interactive, practice-oriented technologies and updated equipment. As noted by the participants of the focus groups – undergraduate and graduate students, the problem of out dated educational approaches attributes not only to a separate region, in this case Udmurt Republic, but to modern Russia at large.

It is also observed there is a need to modify curricula, as the number of courses taught is only indirectly compatible to certain qualifications or duplicate previously taught ones. Informant students paid attention to the negative consequences of the existing point-rating system, which actually does not conform to educational goals, when, instead of gaining new knowledge, students are primarily forced to gain additional points that are unlikely to be counted by employers.

The need to be actively engaged in research projects and practice-oriented activities turns out to be essential for student participants of focus groups. They argued and provided examples that this area of education is underdeveloped in the university though it is seen as important for student self-realization. Literally it is less likely to be supported by university administration. Another negative effect was that students were aware they were trapped by social stereotypes of Russian realities as employers and university faculty see bachelor education as a basic stage of higher education, without taking into account the duration, intensity and complexity of educational process.

The importance of feedback via adaptive computer environment which provides a diversity of student age, student gender, their university readiness, their psychological, personal and religious preferences, is a vital condition for the effective development of the university educational space (Bimba, Idris, Al-Hunaiyyan, Mahmud, & Bt-Mohd, 2017; Normadhi et al., 2019). In terms of this, the major need of employers remains to be close links and interactions with the university in a full-length educational process. External participants of the focus group, among them businesses and NGO representatives, emphasize the significance of developing competitive environment, including competition among faculty. However, expectations of employers to immediately have well-qualified professionals as well as prioritize principles of market competition are not realistic. Modern multifunctional university cannot possibly be exclusively market-oriented, this may bring to an academic and sociocultural downgrading (Bok, 2015).

According to employers, the current situation in the city of Izhevsk, the capital city of Udmurt Republic, literally looks as a deadlock, when neither universities nor city authorities show any interest in cooperation. Enhancement of higher education quality and its flexibility towards labour market are major sources of positive economic transformations in the region (Hromcová & Agnese, 2018), such as prospect-orientation, core competencies, described in the Atlas of new professions (Gurban & Tarasyev, 2016). Finally, educational programmes should keep high academic standards, respond to labour market changes and equip students with professional competencies in advance, prior new profession and transformations in a separate area acquire mass proportion.

To sum up the research results on university faculty, most crucial requirement for this group of stakeholders is to review the relations between the employees, that is - university teachers, and the employers, i.e. the university administration. Consequently, it requires reviewing assessment criteria both qualitative and quantitative. Above all, amendments into a teacher contract are needed as an amount of job duties for this category of professionals overexceed traditionally accepted payments levels in higher education.

According to informants review, there may be at least two solutions. The first one suggests balanced work load that would include not only contact hours in class, i.e. lectures, workshops, laboratory work, it should also involve extra curriculum hours spent outside classroom that are crucial for research, academic, educational and social activities. In this term, the experience of universities in the USA, where academic and research workloads are inserted into faculty contracts, may seem interesting and beneficial. The second solution implies differentiation in teachers positions with the focus on teacher activity, i.e. teacher, teacher-researcher, teacher-project maker etc. This would lead to more effective reporting and better time management, finally, will help teachers achieve goals in their subject areas.

7. Conclusion

Thus, according to empiric research findings we can make a number of conclusions on what current challenges to meet in order to develop educational space of a regional transitive university.

First, this needs restructuring educational process so as to meet labour market requirements. To add, new educational technologies, advanced technical equipment and new scientific advancements in the relevant area play a key role in educational process. It should be revised in order to abandon the practice of routine lecturing and classes exclusively in the classroom. Consequently this will require reviewing payment criteria for faculty and staff as well as educational criteria of student assessment. As a result student engagement into the development and implementation of university policy should be significantly enhanced. Second, this will bring to some changes in relations between university faculty and university administrations that obviously involve reviewing teacher multiple functions and responsibilities. It also requires some changes in reporting and evaluation related to both qualitative and quantitative criteria. Third, university administration should be proactive and initiative in interactions with external stakeholders i.e. employers, NGOs, municipal and regional authorities. With their university policy focusing on state assignments only, universities are at risk to be locked out on education and almost irresponsible to external transformations, in particular labour markets. To sum up, universities are basically viewed as a “place” where diverse social innovations are designed and tested; and human capital

is developed (Chatterji & Kiran, 2017). Notably, willing to be region-forming entities, regional universities, which go through transformations from transit to transitive university, can and must initiate interactions of all regional social actors to help their own development and regional collaborations for the benefit of all regional stakeholders. It is the universities that must become drivers of regional development.

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