Social inquiry for higher education in Russia: Sociological context

Yulia Isakova, and Inga Sagiryan

Don State Technical University, Gagarin Sq., 1, Rostov on Don, 344003, Russian Federation

Abstract. The purpose of the work is to determine the characteristics of the social demand for higher education in Russia. The methodological basis of the research is built around the neo-institutional theory, namely D. North's theory of institutional evolution. A theoretical model of the social inquiry for higher education in Russia was developed; four factors with the greatest influence on the social demand were formulated: 1) social inertia; 2) market laws; 3) students' intentions; 4) fashion and trends. The research was conducted and the results of comprehension of features of the social demand for higher education in Russia were presented. The qualitative empirical research aimed at verification of the proposed model of the social inquiry along with the analysis and comparison of the importance of the formulated factors. The theoretical model of the social demand for higher education in Russia was developed; a comparison of concepts of the social inquiry was made.

Keywords: higher education, social inquiry, social demand, sociology of education, market of educational services, demand for education, institute of education

1 Introduction

Today's world is subject to a constant change and transformation, and so are social institutions. Recent years have introduced serious adjustments to the patterns of a human interaction around the world. First, humanity lives in the age of information technology, which provides uninterrupted communication at both the interpersonal and mass levels. Second, the worldwide coronavirus pandemic has challenged all of us to learn to work remotely and limit our social contacts with others. Third, the rapidly changing economy, influenced by the previous two factors, makes us realize the fact that established human interactions are being transformed along with an increasing intensity, as the economic context has always served as a major catalyst for social changes. In this situation, higher education is also being transformed, following modern trends and adapting to the needs of today's students. The institution of higher education around the world is ceasing to be a monopoly for producing qualified and competent specialists, since the three factors described above have accelerated the spread of quasi-educational Internet resources and online mass courses, forcing classical full-time higher education to compete with them. All the facts mentioned above have a direct impact on the social inquiry for higher education, changing its understanding by consumers and generally reshaping the market of educational services.

In this situation, the scientific study of the social demand for higher education in Russia acquires scientific relevance through the prism of its transformation trends. Our work aims to methodologically substantiate the concept of the social demand for higher education and identify the factors that have the greatest impact on it.

Russian sociologists do not often study the topic of social inquiry, but there are scientific works on similar topics that are worth mentioning. A.A. Salmina researched the social inquiries of Russians in the context of identifying the factors of their origins [1], A.A. Vilkov, N.I. Shestov and A.A. Abramov studied the social inquiry for Russia's future in the mass consciousness of citizens [2]. N.V. Latova focused on the study of the actors of the social demand for institutional changes in modern Russia [3]. In all the studies dedicated to the research of the social inquiry, there is a common pattern: the researchers choose their specific niche and fill it with the context of the social inquiry of this or that social group for some product or phenomenon. There are a few conducted studies, including those devoted to education in Russia. E.M. Shulman and A.A. Kutuzova were concerned with the change of the educational inquiry as a reflection of the social norms transformation [4], D.N. Borovinskaya studied the social inquiry for creative education, and E.V. Bryzgalina studied the social inquiry in the context of its measurement possibilities [5]. It is worth noting that most of the articles devoted to the social inquiry rarely pay attention to its methodological education and attempt to highlight its indicators and criteria. The number of works written about the social demand is small and does not allow one to say that it has been
thoroughly studied by the scientific community. It becomes obvious that there are cognitive gaps in the research niche of the social inquiry for higher education, associated with both empirical research and theoretical justification of the mechanisms of the social inquiry.

2 Materials and Methods

The methodology of our study is based on the neo-institutional paradigm, namely D. North's concept of social evolution [6]. According to this concept, social institutions evolve when the old ways of organizing their work no longer correspond to the times and require optimization and increased efficiency. This is exactly the situation observed in the higher education market. As mentioned above, the coronavirus pandemic and the transforming economy in the information age accentuate the archaic and retrograde nature of the institution of higher education, which increasingly requires optimization and the organizational intervention that can steer it in the same direction as the modern trends do.

Based on the methodological foundations of the neo-institutional understanding of institutions, we will attempt to instrumentalize the concept of the social inquiry and highlight the most important factors that influence it. To reach this goal, we will use the results of an empirical study conducted by the All-Russian Public Opinion Research Center in 2021 on the inquiry into Russian education [7]. Another source of the empirical data is the survey of the Public Opinion Foundation, implemented in August 2020, aimed at identifying the quality of Russian higher education [8].

3 Results

The closest concept of the social inquiry is the social demand, as it can be understood as a social need that is relevant to society as a whole. Interestingly, the concept of the social demand is most often used in the context of education, and researchers prefer to use this term to analyze what Russian citizens want from the institution of education. It should be noted that this term is most relevant for economic and educational sciences, as it operates with the categories of the demand, supply, as well as the needs of society. In our opinion, the term applies either to so-called "market" institutions or to public goods. In the market institutions the relationship between actors is governed by the fundamental laws of the market: supply and demand. The institutions that produce public goods, in turn, are characterized by the fact that there is an actor that distributes goods to a wide range of people on a gratuitous basis at the expense of state funding. Primary and secondary education in Russia can be considered a public good since it is guaranteed by the state and is compulsory for everyone. For this reason, the "demand" for such public good takes place in the social reality. Similarly, the principle of the social demand works in institutions based on the laws of supply and demand: if consumers of services produced by an institution have no desire to purchase them, then it will have to adapt to this situation in one way or another. Thus, the concept of the "social demand" is one-dimensional and subject to the principle of supply and demand.

The situation concerning the concept of the social inquiry is quite different. This is explained by the fact that a demand has existed in the abstract form for a sufficiently long time, while an inquiry, in its turn, exists in a specific time interval and is determined by many factors not reducible to the law of supply and demand.

On this basis let us formulate an instrumental definition of the social inquiry. The public inquiry is the society's need for a service or good, dictated by socio-economic conditions prevailing at a particular point in time.

As follows from the above definition, the main difference from the social inquiry is the temporal nature of the demand, actual for a certain period and under the influence of various socio-economic conditions. Let us draw attention to the fact that the social demand for public goods does not undergo significant changes over time. For example, the social demand for health care is associated with the fact that the population needs timely medical care, and the social demand, in turn, is dictated by the population's need for a non-contact, remote and safe interaction with the medical personnel during the pandemic coronavirus. In this example, we see that the social demand for the public good is static, while the social demand is dynamic.

Let us turn to the defining features of the social demand for higher education in Russia. There are two approaches to understanding higher education. The first is aimed at understanding it as a public good, and the second is as a service. The first case characterizes higher education in the Soviet Union when it was free, and the second is relevant to Western countries with developed market economies, where traditionally going to university was considered an expensive investment in their future. In modern Russia, we observe a unique situation when higher education is in a hybrid state and can be fully perceived as a public good and as a service at the same time.

Firstly, higher education in Russia is provided at the expense of state funding. Most well-known universities, included in the ratings of the best in Russia and the world, are state and federal universities, financed by the state [9]. At the same time, the availability of higher education is perceived as a necessity, which is confirmed by a mass survey conducted by the All-Russian Center for Public Opinion Research. 81% of the respondents consider higher education necessary. Here we can see that higher education is perceived as something that should be available to everyone.

Secondly, higher education in Russia is commercialized and has the features of paid services. In Russia, many private higher education institutions provide educational services for a fee. It is this type of higher education institution that is a subject of market relations, and their interaction with students and applicants is reduced to relations between consumers and producers of services.

Let's look at the data obtained from a sociological survey conducted by the Public Opinion Foundation, and
answer the question: why do we need higher education in Russia? (Table 1)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To find a good job</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For knowledge</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Because that’s what everyone needs</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I can’t say</td>
<td>4</td>
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As can be seen from the table above, there is a dualism in the perception of higher education. 47% perceive it as a utilitarian service that gives the necessary competencies and skills required to work and earn money, while 35% perceive it as a traditional necessity. This perception is still relevant and works on the principle of social inertia. We can say that those old Soviet ideals about higher education as a social good are still being translated into the minds of young people. This perception is also actualized by the policy of the state, which prefers to keep education in its hands using funding, rather than "letting" it float free, where it will be navigated only by market mechanisms.

Thus, Russian higher education is in a state of transformation and searching for its own identity. On the one hand, there is a growing understanding in society that education is a tool for success and economic wellbeing, but on the other hand, it is still perceived as a public good, which should be available to everyone.

In the above-described situation, it becomes clear that the analysis of the social demand for higher education simply cannot consider all the nuances and specific features of higher education in Russia to a proper extent, as it is currently in a state of transformation. The neo-institutional theory postulates that a social institution has two planes: formal and informal. The first is associated with normative rules, which many actors must obey. The second is characterized by the informal interaction of social actors outside the transparent institutional space. In the context of higher education, this works as follows. Russian higher education grows in the rankings and produces a large number of qualified graduates (i.e. from the formal side it works effectively), but these graduates are often undemanded in the labor market and feel the drop in value of higher education. Such dissonance of formal and actual results of educational activity indicates that higher education, which is formed as a public good, must exist within the framework of the market economy (where it should be a service) and cannot keep up with constantly changing economic trends.

This allows us to conclude that Russian higher education has the characteristic features that influence the formation of the social inquiry. Let us formulate the main factors of the social inquiry for higher education in Russia:

1. Social inertia.
2. Laws of the market.
3. Intentions of applicants/students/graduates.

Let us elaborate on each of them.

Social inertia is an important factor influencing the social demand for higher education. It can be explained by the fact that the parents of applicants play a significant role in enrollment in higher education. Firstly, the importance of additional education and tutoring, which is paid for by parents, is growing. Secondly, parents’ ideas about "prestigious" professions have a serious influence on the choice of a university. Thirdly, the financial security of parents will determine the possibility of entering the university on a fee-paying basis and the possibility to send the child to study to another city. According to the research conducted by E.L. Mogilchak [10], parents have a significant influence on the choice of a university, the organization of preparation for admission, and resource provision. It is they who instill the value of higher education in young people, transmitting to them the value of a diploma of higher education using social inertia.

The laws of the market determine the forms of educational services and form a list of in-demand specialties. The state is the main investor in education; therefore, it is the state that determines the specialties that can be considered a priority. This is one of the problems observed in contemporary Russian higher education. The labor market rapidly changes, and the authorities are faced with the task of timely catching up with its trends and adjusting the higher education system to the most in-demand professions on the market. Here we can see a contradiction, because, on the one hand, education in the modern world is primarily needed to create professional personnel, but the state regulator’s understanding of labor market trends does not correspond to reality. It can be said that the state as the main “customer” of the educational product works on a formal and imitative plane, which does not coincide with the real one.

Intentions of applicants/students/graduates should, by design, respond to major trends in the labor market and society. In an effectively functioning institution of higher education, the motives of students should coincide with the general vector of the educational strategy. Now, highly qualified specialists for highly specialized and niche industries are in demand. However, in this situation there is a serious problem related to the low motivation of students. This can be explained in the following way: according to the research of the All-Russian Center of Public Opinion Research, the share of young people who draw parallels between higher education and life success is steadily decreasing. According to the data provided by the All-Russian Center for Public Opinion Research, 40% of the young people, surveyed in 2016, believed in this interrelation, but in 2021 there were already 32%. At the same time, most people (62%) believe that there is no direct correlation between having higher education and success in life. It is becoming evident that while the demand for higher education remains high, students’ motivation to pursue it is steadily decreasing. We believe that now higher education is becoming one of the formal requirements that few people pay attention to. V.I. Stepanov in his study of the motives for entering
higher education institutions found that the motivation "diploma is good to have" is close to "I want to get knowledge and skills necessary for future work" [11]. And this indicates that the dual state of Russian higher education as a public good and service allows unmotivated students, ready to engage in imitative academic activities to get a diploma, to get into higher education. At the same time, the share of motivated students willing to acquire skills and competencies remains, but the presence in study groups of almost half of the students working just to "get a diploma" steadily reduces the quality of the educational product and has an impact on the image of the graduates of higher education institutions. Thus, the dual state of Russian higher education also affects the intentions of students, who find it difficult to determine their true motives for admission.

Fashion and trends, as it seems to us, are the most contradictory and difficult-to-assess factor, influencing higher education. At the time of writing this article in 2021 SMM-managers, web designers, and IT industry specialists were in demand, but the question becomes relevant: should the education system adjust to the ever-changing market demands and try to teach exactly these specialties, often to the detriment of the classical academic ones? In our opinion, the answer is no. Not because the higher education system has a goal of producing intellectuals and academics, but because current trends make it easy to differentiate between what can be considered a higher qualification and what can be trained elsewhere. In other words, there is no point in trying to learn a trendy profession in a higher education institution, because it takes significant time for higher education to come up with a systematic and reproducible process of training professionals while the trend can change.

As a final illustration of how higher education and fashion trends interact, let us turn to the data provided by the Public Opinion Foundation on assessments of the prospects for the widespread introduction of distance higher education. This question is very relevant because online education is the flagship of innovation and one of the potential vectors for the development of the entire Russian higher education system (Table 2). We will talk about these results in more detail in the next section of the article.

**Table 2.** "How the transition to distance education will affect the quality of higher education?"

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<tr>
<td>Positively</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negatively</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Will not affect</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I Can’t say</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
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4 Discussion

Critics of the Russian higher education system often accuse it of being retrograde, stagnant, and unable to adapt to changing conditions in time, but we believe that this can no longer be a subject of criticism. The explanation is as follows: the realities of the labor market have shown that the university is not and should not be a monopolist in the production of highly qualified personnel. Online courses, webinars, intensives, workshops, online lessons, and other digital forms of quasi-educational services will easily occupy this niche and can work in it much more effectively than they do in higher school. Such types of educational services are much more adaptable, do not require the creation of state standards, and, most importantly, the labor market does not demand educational diplomas and other qualifying documents from specialists in relevant and "fashionable" professions. Modern trends are built around skills, experience, and an impressive portfolio. In this situation, higher education is in a situation where, on the one hand, it is under attack by quasi-educational organizations and projects, but on the other hand, it has a unique chance to finally stop the long process of searching for its identity and to determine which part of the social inquiry for education it will satisfy.

If we turn to the data in Table 2, it becomes obvious that the quality of higher education will suffer during the transition to distance education. Let us note that such categorical opinion of the respondents is related only to the form of education, and not to its content. We assume that if consumers of educational services did not appreciate the results of the unchanged system of higher education in the online format, then attempts to optimize it and turn it into something completely new, aimed at meeting the needs of the labor market and work with highly specialized "fashionable" professions will be evaluated even worse.

In our opinion, the most effective step for the classical higher school will not be a transition to technocratic and widespread implementation of managerial tools, but a concentration on the directions that the Russian school did best of all: creating scientific personnel and developing general professional competencies. This means that the positioning of Russian higher education should be based on training intellectuals [13] who think analytically, are erudite, and can work with information, rather than narrowly focused specialists who may no longer be in demand on the labor market by the time they graduate. It becomes obvious that quasi-educational organizations and private universities have a significant advantage: they can in a short time teach a relevant and in-demand profession, but because of this focus they cannot pay proper attention to the transformation of a former schoolchild into an intellectual. Higher education, on the contrary, has an advantage in working with general professional and scientific competencies but cannot promptly adapt to labor market trends and produce an educational product that satisfies modern employers. It becomes obvious that the social inquiry for higher education is becoming much easier to differentiate than it was 10 years ago. The ubiquity of the Internet and access to any information force us to realize that many people can acquire knowledge without going to university because they no longer need university libraries.
5 Conclusion

Therefore, having considered the specifics of the social inquiry for higher education in Russia and having formulated the main criteria affecting it, we can conclude that Russian higher education, perceived [14] as a service and a social good at the same time, can no longer work effectively and meet the needs of students. The above-described condition closes the perspective for higher education to choose the most profitable niche for itself and creates conflict situations, where effective managers of higher education institutions strive to teach relevant and in-demand professions, but the teaching staff simply have no time to fully prepare for the educational process. This leads to the intensification of imitation processes in the educational environment, where students may be taught according to outdated educational programs or taught ineffectively. Social inquiry for higher education is in a similar and ambivalent state. On the one hand, some highly motivated students want to become highly qualified specialists and are willing to pay money for educational services, and on the other hand, some students want to get a diploma in higher education and do not plan to work in their specialty. As a result, the quality of the educational product lowers [15], the image of higher education suffers, and the social demand for it decreases.

Young people understand that there are alternatives in the form of online mass courses, intensives, webinars, workshops, and other innovative quasi-educational projects. And they will be more enthusiastic about paying money to them for quick training of professional skills than spending four to nine years at university.

The coronavirus pandemic, information technology, and the complicated socio-economic situation have a significant impact on the social inquiry for higher education and require the whole system of higher education to be directed in a way that will satisfy most of the students. The Russian legislator needs to understand how one sees higher education: as a service or as a public good. We believe that the best outcome in this situation would be to concentrate the resources of higher education around the strengths of classical higher education, namely the training of analytical and erudite intellectuals. As for private universities and other quasi-educational organizations, they should continue to operate within the framework of the educational services market and be guided by the classical principles of supply and demand. Higher education should not try to compete with modern educational platforms but find its niche within which it can operate effectively.

References