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National Barriers to Completion of Doctoral Programmes at Russian Universities

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TRANSFORMATION OF DOCTORAL EDUCATION WORLDWIDE

Global trends and challenges:

- **Global competition of universities and internalization**
- **Massification of doctoral education**
- **Overproduction of PhD graduates and low quality of PhD training (in some cases)**

Responses of doctoral education systems:

- **Shift from mode 1 to mode 2 (emphasis on organized coursework and development of transferable skills)**
- **Reorientation towards wider labor markets**
- **Diversification of doctoral programs and doctoral students (excellence through diversity)**



DOCTORAL EDUCATION IN RUSSIA

- **historical separation between education and research (Froumin et al. 2014)**
- **low level of development of such scientific areas as humanities, social sciences, psychology and health sciences (Gokhberg and Sagieva 2007)**
- **low attractiveness of the academic work and a lack of financing of scientific jobs (Smolentseva 2003)**
- **a large share of PhD graduates prefers not to pursue academic positions**
- **Low completion rates**



REFORM OF DOCTORAL EDUCATION IN RUSSIA

Federal Law “On Education in Russian Federation” (2012):

- **Doctoral programs as third level of education**
- **Transition from “master-apprentice” to structured model of doctoral education**
- **Increase in the volume of organized coursework**
- **Dual system of evaluation: state certification (diploma with the qualification of “Researcher. Lecturer”) and dissertation defense (awarding of the academic degree)**
- **higher requirements to the scientific outputs of PhD candidates**



METHOD AND DATA

mixed-method study with a parallel design:

- **Interviews with PhD students and PhD program officials: 20 full-time PhD students from 11 highly selective universities (participants of 5-100 Project), 11 heads of doctoral studies offices from highly selective universities (participants of 5-100 Project).**
- **Online-survey of PhD students: 1866 PhD students of highly selective universities (24% of all PhD students who study in these universities).**



RESULTS: NATIONAL BARRIERS TO COMPLETION OF DOCTORAL PROGRAMS

- 1. Problems of transition to structured PhD programs**
- 2. Diffusion of goals**
- 3. Unpreparedness for the expansion of PhD education**
- 4. Ineffective selection system**
- 5. Forced need to have paid job outside institutions due to the lack of financial support**
- 6. Excessive dependence on the supervisor**
- 7. Gap between a requirement to have published papers before thesis defense and students' skills for publication activity**



PROBLEMS OF TRANSITION TO STRUCTURED DOCTORAL PROGRAMS

The increase of coursework was unexpected for doctoral students and supervisors and conflicted with their perception of PhD education as the first step in an academic career

Imagine guys, who completed the master's degree. They come to us when they are 25 years old. And we again set them to the desks, again sessions, again lectures. What will we teach them? (interview with staff 7).

You cannot imagine how many of them are ready to drop out. They need to do research, but they should be here and sit at a desk (interview with staff 5).

42% of PhD students experienced minor (32%) or major (10%) difficulties because of the increased coursework and requirements.



DIFFUSION OF GOALS

This diffusion of goals between providing teaching and research skills was opposed by both supervisors and PhD students.

In the current model, we prepare teachers–researchers, but not all students want to be teachers. We should not interfere one with the other. There are scientists, who promote science, but who are not able to teach the results of their research to other people (interview with staff 3)

Only 21% of PhD students are planning to work as a teacher in the future. This share is much bigger among those who study in education (51%) and humanities (53%) and much smaller among those who study in math (13%) and technical sciences (12%); for social sciences, the share is 26%.



UNPREPAREDNESS FOR THE EXPANSION OF DOCTORAL EDUCATION

The increase of the PhD student body results in the situation where scientific supervisors are forced to take a larger number of PhD students, which negatively affects the efficiency of supervision.

A PhD student is an expensive thing for a supervisor, which requires great attention. We are required to increase the number of PhD students: last year we admitted 100 students, this year we should admit 150 students. Where will we get so many supervisors? (interview with staff 9).



INEFFECTIVE SELECTION SYSTEM

Current system of doctorate students' selection does not allow the filtering out of applicants with pragmatic motivation.

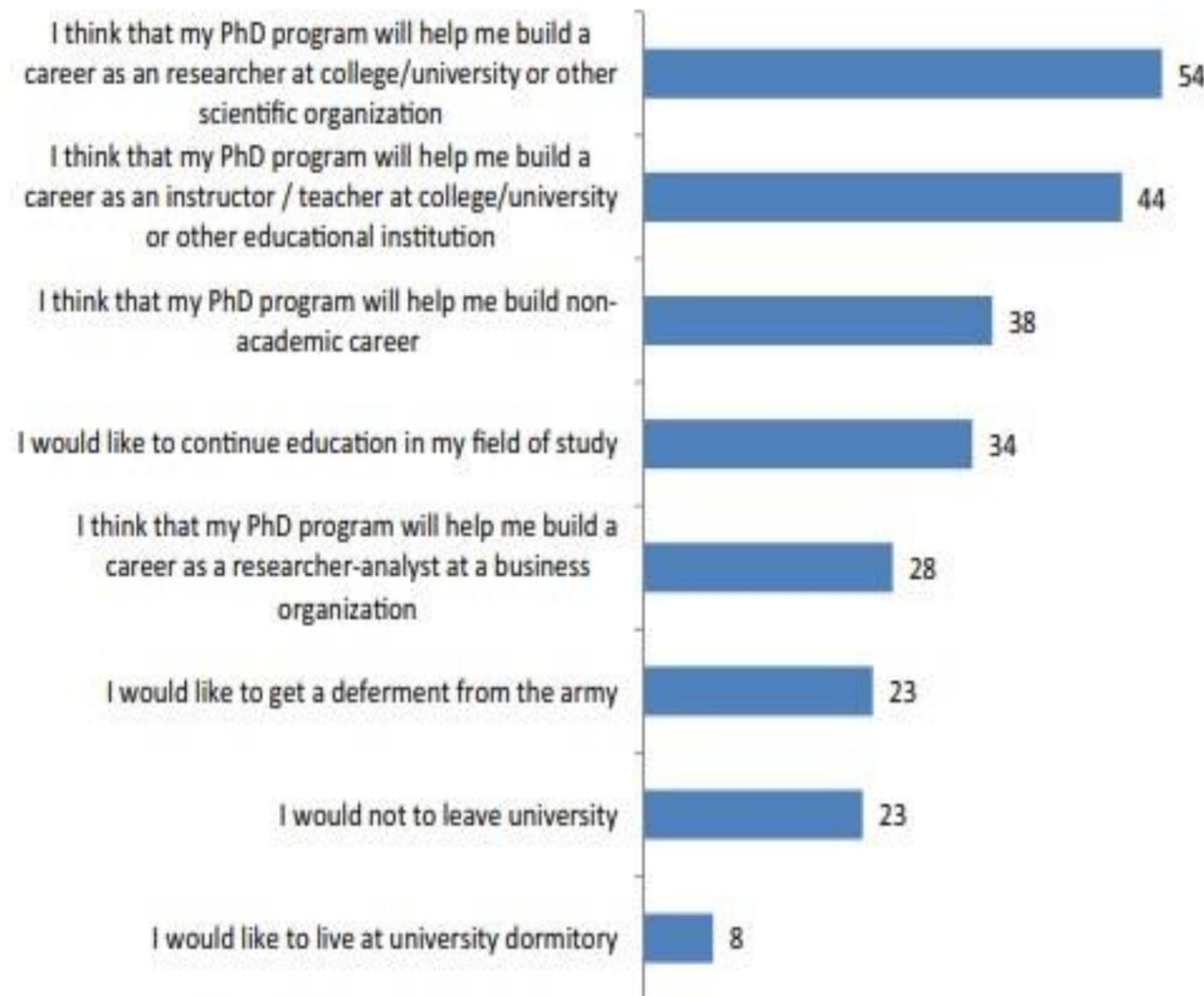


Fig. 2 Reasons to apply for a PhD program

We are required to increase the effectiveness of doctoral programs, but how can we do it when we are forced to accept PhD students who graduated from other universities? They are like a 'pig in a poke' for us. We see only their exams results, and do not know their motives and competencies, how they can work (interview with staff 9).



FORCED NEED TO HAVE PAID JOB OUTSIDE UNIVERSITY

The scholarship PhD students is very small (about \$50 for programs in social sciences and humanities and about \$120 for programs in engineering and natural sciences), and most PhD students are forced to work in addition to studying on the PhD program and doing their research.

The size of state scholarship is maximum 8,000 roubles. What can they do with this sum? They need to support their families. Thus they are forced to have job (interview with staff 11)

Almost 90% of PhD students have paid job. 39% of PhD students work at their university, and another 51% work outside the university. At least one paid job is somewhat or strongly related to the theme of the dissertation for 48% of PhD students who have paid job. 47% of PhD students who have paid job reported that they have a lack of time to do research because of the job.



EXCESSIVE DEPENDENCE ON THE SUPERVISOR AND SCIENTIFIC ISOLATION

Usually, the supervisor is the only person who controls the research progress of a doctoral student. There are very few institutionalized practices of control over the progress in the dissertation apart from the supervising process.

All perceive the PhD education as a black box, when someone is doing something for three years, and the result depends on the relations between supervisor and student (interview with the student 1, social sciences, year 2).

21% of PhD students reported that they experienced minor (16%) or major (5%) difficulties because of the problems in communication with their scientific supervisor.



SKILLS OF DOCTORAL STUDENTS FOR PUBLICATION ACTIVITY

The requirement to have published papers prior to a thesis defense seriously challenges doctoral students and leads to an increase in time to- degree.

By the end of the second year we should have two published articles on the theme of the dissertation. No one has accomplished this task 100%. One had not managed to finish their articles, another had no time to publish their articles because of the long publication cycle (interview with the student 8, social sciences, year 3).

One third (34%) of doctoral students reported minor and 21% major difficulties with the publications. The share of those who experienced major problems with publications was significantly bigger among doctoral students in educational sciences (26%) and in humanities (26%). The value of this indicator was less among doctoral students who study math and natural sciences (18%), technical sciences (22%) and social sciences (22%).



DISCUSSION

- **How to minimize the “transition costs” while shifting to structured model of doctoral education?**
- **Should the structured model of doctoral education be the one and only universal standard?**
- **Who should be prepared in doctoral programs: teachers, researchers, specialist for wider labor markets?**
- **How to overcome the problem of scientific isolation and excessive dependence on supervisor?**
- **How to combine effectively paid job and doctoral training?**
- **...**

To see more: Maloshonok, N. & Terentev, E. National barriers to the completion of doctoral programs at Russian universities. Higher Education (2018). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-018-0267-9>



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