Trends and challenges in vocational education in Russia

Key words: vocational education, modernization, employment, labour market.

Streszczenie
W artykule zaprezentowano przekrojowo najważniejsze kierunki rozwoju edukacji zawodowej w Rosji oraz zewnętrzne i wewnętrzne czynniki wpływające na modernizację kształcenia i szkolenia zawodowego (VET) powiązane z rynkiem, odpowiadające wymaganiom innowacyjnej gospodarki kraju. Szczególną uwagę poświęcono przedstawieniu niejednolitej oferty szkoleń zawodowych skierowanych do różnych odbiorców, w tym nowo stworzonych instytucji – centrów kwalifikacji mających na celu szybkie dostosowywanie się do zmiennych wymogów rynku pracy, uwarunkowanych przez zmiany w poszczególnych zawodach.

Introduction

Like countries all around the globe, Russia is strongly concerned with providing competent workforce for its labour market [9]. The relevance of this goal is further enhanced by the country’s goal to build an innovative economy [11]. To this end the primary focus is on addressing the persisting skills gaps and skills shortages. According to the Ministry of Education and Science, the mismatch varies by the sector, ranging from 30 to 70 % of the demand, with the skills gaps most pronounced in the innovative sectors and at high-tech companies [12]. Vocational education is instrumental in meeting this goal. This idea is stressed in all major policy documents adopted in the country in the recent years.

Concrete steps for the implementation of the above goal are set out in the Strategy for Workforce Training and Skills Development in the Russian Federation for the Period up to 2020 that defines key long-term policy objectives for training skilled workers and middle-level specialists [10].

The implementation of the Strategy is largely contingent on key internal and external impact factors and trends, the latter inevitable in the age of globalisation.

The most obvious external factors affecting the development of vocational education and training in the Russian Federation embrace, apart from globalisation:
- rapid outdating of certain occupations and appearance of new occupations under the impact of technological innovations, which results in dynamic changes in the industrial production processes, economy and its social sectors, including a need to introduce rigid environmental standards for production (energy saving methods and alternative sources of energy, green technology, etc.);
- internationalisation processes in education,
- negative demographic trends,
- after-effects of the persistent economic crises that aggravate the employment situation [ibid].
As for the negative internal factors impacting VET development, the key ones comprise a growing competition on the part of the corporate vocational training systems that big domestic and international companies set up (as it is, 66% employers prefer to provide basic and continuing training and retraining for their employees at their own training centres).

Overall, such practices are in line with the global trend towards enhancing the role of in-company training of personnel [2].

Another internal impact factor is a low prestige of VET compared to higher education that results in the population choice of higher education options. It should be stressed that the competition with higher education is further aggravated by the negative demographic trends. It is estimated that by 2016 the 17–25 age cohort will shrink by 12%-15%, with all the ensuing consequences for VET schools [10].

The low prestige of VET naturally results in a low attractiveness of workers qualifications and of qualifications of mid-level specialists compared to higher education qualifications, despite an ever growing demand for the former on the labour market. This impact factor can partly be accounted for by a weak system of career guidance and counseling, and by inadequate quality of skills of VET teachers and of instructors of practical training, which is another issue that is being currently addressed.

Also, the VET system is negatively affected by the remaining poor infrastructure and outdated equipment at many VET schools.

Nevertheless, despite the above-mentioned impact factors, the movement towards modernisation is obvious. The recently approved Strategy for Workforce Training and Skills Development in the Russian Federation for the Period up to 2020 aims at addressing the above issues [10].

Key modernization areas

It is obvious that meeting the set objectives requires a holistic and comprehensive approach that would be in line with the provisions of the new Law “On Education in the Russian Federation” [8].

The Strategy embraces:
- modernisation of the legal framework for VET;
- development of public-private partnerships to ensure full-fledged transition to market-driven VET;
- enhancing the role of non-governmental/independent institutions in the development of the skilled workforce training;
- establishment of an up-to-date continuing training system;
- integration of VET modernisation in the economic, industrial, labour market and social welfare policies;
- internationalisation of VET;
- putting in place an up-to-date VET teaching and learning paradigm.

To address the skills mismatches and gaps, the VET system will be enhancing interaction with the world of work to ensure prompt response to its changing needs. In this context the anticipation of labour market skills needs is given topmost importance. To the latter end the introduction of up-to-date anticipation tools on the national and regional level is envisaged. Reliable skills forecasts will be conducive to enhancing the flexibility of planning the skills supply and will be achieved by means of quantitative and qualitative anticipation of current and future skills demand (by the sector, by the RF region, and nation-wide). The improved skills anticipation will also help to improve the accuracy of VET target intake figures and the quality of the public contract for workforce training under which public funds are allocated and distributed among VET institutions.

As it is, all VET schools have to compete for the public contract that is a mighty motivation factor for their improvement. Currently attempts are undertaken to update the principles underpinning the distribution of the public funds among VET schools implementing initial and secondary vocational education programmes that take into account best international practices and the needs of enterprises and organizations.

It is obvious that anticipation of skills needs alone cannot improve the VET system. Like everywhere in the world, the VET system needs up-to-date curricula based on learning outcomes and supported by a sound quality assurance system, as well as teachers having competences that are adequate to the modernisation goals and objectives. Overall, the modernised VET paradigm is
expected to offer students more opportunities for self-managed and workplace learning, which is well in line with current international developments that attribute a priority place to workplace training.

To the latter end, cooperation of the VET system with businesses is considered of primary importance. Only when such cooperation is sustainable, will employers respect and accept the formal diplomas and qualifications [3, 4]. Despite the legal requirements for employers to cooperate with VET and to participate in the development of VET standards and curricula, this cooperation cannot yet be considered sufficient to meet the development goals. This may partly be accounted for by a lack of culture of VET - labour market interaction under the market economy, as well as by a lack of efficient mechanisms and formats to involve the real and social sector entities in the governance of the VET system and of education institutions, including a lack of financial mechanisms and tax incentives.

On top of that, VET institutions at large have not yet got rid of the misconception that they, and not the students and employers, are the key players and know better what to teach and how to teach. It can well be assumed that this mentality related issue coupled with the advanced age of a big part of VET teachers and administrators, is the most difficult one to address, as it requires a change in the pattern of group behavior.

To ensure that VET curricula meet the needs of the labour market, occupational standards are under development under the aegis of the RF Ministry of Labour and Social Development. The content of occupational standards is intended to be used as a foundation for shaping the learning outcomes both in VET standards, and in VET curricula. Currently methodological implications of the above are explored.

To enhance the occupational standards development, various approaches are piloted to institutionalize sector employers’ activities and their interaction with VET on the national, interregional and regional levels. Part of such activities is the independent accreditation of curricula by sector employers. However, institutionalization of such mechanisms is a long-term process that requires both a legal framework, and organizational instruments. The latter, given the size of the country and the big number of sectors, is by means an easy process.

Another tool to promote market-driven VET is the introduction of applied bachelor degree programmes. This is an innovation that does not come easy. Given that applied bachelor programmes refer to level 5 of the EQF and occupy an intermediate position between level 4 and level 6, it is yet undecided who should be in charge of them – the VET system or the higher education system. Formally, such programmes are part of higher education, but in real terms VET colleges are better equipped to take care of the practical aspect of training than universities, at least – in certain occupations of training. Currently, the concept of applied bachelor qualifications and education standards are in preparation with the involvement of a wide range of VET, higher education and business stakeholders.

In 2009 the first piloting of applied bachelor programmes began across the country involving both universities and VET colleges. Its results are currently analysed.

On the whole, the slow acceptance of applied bachelor qualifications is exacerbated by the fact that academic bachelor qualifications are not yet fully accepted by both universities and employers. This is largely due to the fact that the concept of learning outcomes/competences is not yet fully rooted both in the minds of university staff, and of employers. Anyhow, there are universities that have already begun piloting applied bachelor programmes – they are those that have close links with employers/enterprises.

Another challenge for the introduction of the new qualifications in Russia is a lack of an up-to-date qualifications framework based on learning outcomes. It should be stressed that work on the NQF that would be in line with the EQF is underway taking into account recent international developments and trends [5, 7].

Efforts to ensure that that the graduates’ skills match the needs of the economy include development of effective quality assurance mechanisms and improvement of teaching and learning methods, as well as enhancement of labour-market responsiveness of the delivered curricula.

To this end it is intended to introduce up-to-date quality assurance tools including independent accreditation of curricula by sector employers, and quality assessment tools for VET institutions based on performance indicators. The latter tools will also be used for the differentiation of remuneration to be paid to teachers and practical training instructors under what is called an “effective contract”.
With a view to ensure a timely updating of the curricula content to the labour market demand and to focusing teaching and learning on real jobs’ content, it is intended to further develop public-private partnership mechanisms. These mechanisms will envisage the development and modernization of modular curricula, enhancement of workplace training; provision of professional development opportunities for VET teachers and instructors of practical training in the form of their internships at enterprises.

In the context of the rapidly developing and changing content of occupations and production processes that results in the volatility of the labour market (if such borrowing from the financial market rhetoric is permitted), it is of critical importance to provide the workforce with diverse opportunities to improve and update competences and to ensure professional and personal self-fulfillment. In this context it is envisaged to develop an up-to-date system of career guidance and counseling for lifelong learning [6]. This is really a big challenge as currently orientation and guidance services are fragmented and are provided by employment service agencies, VET schools and, to a smaller degree – by general schools.

Orientation and guidance in the lifelong learning format are inalienable from the expanded remit of VET institutions that are growingly involved in offering training to diversified target groups and have to adapt to their training needs, which requires new behaviours on the part of VET institutions that are traditionally used to dealing only with young cohorts. However, the expansion of the remit is expected to act as a mighty incentive for modernising the VET schools and their teaching and learning methods.

Given the growing demand for upskilling and re-skilling of the workforce and to ensure provision of optimal training opportunities for diverse target groups, a new type of training centres is introduced, namely the so-called qualifications centres that will deliver continuing VET programmes and all sorts of other short-term courses for the adult population. To ensure a systemic character to these developments, a concept of continuing training is currently developed in the country to bring together and concert efforts in this area of different stakeholders.

Another issue that is acquiring a growing importance is that of access and equity. Like all over the world, equal access to VET is one of the cornerstones of VET modernisation in Russia, given the number of orphans and children and youth left without parental care studying at VET schools. Expansion of access also relates to other target groups, such as general school drop-outs, the long-term unemployed population, workers made redundant, people with special needs, etc.

Like all VET systems, the Russian VET system aims at optimizing the available resources. To this end it is envisaged to develop training networks that would integrate several VET schools and enterprises that will jointly be involved in implementing VET curricula, exploiting and maximizing the strengths of each partner.

As has been indicated earlier, competences of VET teachers constitute a negative internal impact factor. To deal with is a set of measures is planned to attract to the VET system specialists from enterprises and companies (technicians and engineers) who will be offered flexible opportunities of acquire a teacher-training qualification. Also, continuing training for VET teachers and instructors of practical training at enterprises will be expanded in the form of internships, to mention but a few envisaged measures. These measures will be coupled with the improvement of the system of certification of teachers and instructors of practical training.

Another development vector is to improve VET governance to enhance the quality of decentralization processes, to increase autonomy of VET providers, their information openness, and to enhance the role of civil society institutions.

To overcome the fragmentary character of governance and administration, it is planned to continue developing participatory steering formats, including:

- VET coordination councils on the federal, interregional and regional level;
- sector councils and foundations (on the federal, interregional and regional levels);
- sector associations of employers, VET schools and VET school principals;
- advisory boards and boards of trustees at VET schools (involving representatives from the real sector).

The so-called territorial education clusters involving enterprises and VET institutions are envisaged to be formed to act as a main tool for coordinating efforts of business, education and the
state aimed at training a skilled workforce. Under these clusters, models for multi-channel financing and delivery of network-based education programs will be developed.

Apart from that, diverse mechanisms to ensure employer participation in training the skilled workforce for enterprises will be put in place, including:

- establishing structural divisions of VET institutions at enterprises;
- concession agreements between VET institutions and enterprises under which enterprises will provide equipment that will be installed on the premises of VET institutions;
- subsides to cover interest rates provided to entities investing borrowed funds in the development of the workforce training infrastructure (including establishment of multi-functional skills centres, development of social infrastructure, e.g., hostels, catering facilities, stadiums);
- establishment of regional (sector-specific) endowment funds for vocational education (that would be used also for training and vocational education of personnel for small and medium-sized enterprises);
- a scheme for financing workforce training, based on individual training vouchers.

Another tool that will be further explored is the tripartite public-private partnerships embracing education authorities, businesses and education institutions.

It is also planned to scale up the use by public VET institutions of their right to be founders and participants of business entities (such as training sites, training centres, small youth enterprises). To this end, it is planned to continue with the optimization of regional networks of public (municipal) VET institutions, so that the average number of students per one VET institutions would amount to 200-600 people on the average.

To optimize and consolidate the use of the limited available resources regional and interregional resource centers (like centres of excellence in UK) will be set up (the existing ones – modernized) to develop training networks and ensure access of VET students to up-to-date equipment and facilities.

To ensure a holistic approach to the education system modernisation and to maximise the modernisation efforts at the VET level, at higher education institutions the structure of training human resources with practical qualifications (applied bachelor qualifications) will be optimised by means of coordinating target intake figures with the intake targets at secondary VET institutions.

And lastly, it should be stressed that all of the above developments take into account both the external and internal impact factors, and the proposed solutions benefit both from internal and international best practices, as Russia attributes serious importance to VET internationalisation viewing it as a new quality of international cooperation. In the context of the latter, one of most relevant recent developments is Russia’s joining the World Skills movement and participation of the Russian team in the 2013 World Skills competitions in Leipzig. Another area of internationalization is the development of international partnerships between VET schools to prepare and implement joint education programs and to participate in international research.

To attract foreign students to Russia and to promote academic mobility, it is envisaged to:

- improve conditions at VET schools for Russian and foreign students, regardless of their citizenship and place of residence;
- increase the intake of foreign students (primarily from the CIS countries) in VET schools;
- improve the conditions of stay in the Russian Federation for foreign students, their social and cultural adaptation, health insurance, and security;
- export Russian education services to countries that are sources of mass migration to the Russian Federation;
- open Russian language learning centres at VET schools in countries with the most intensive migration flows.

To support international partnerships and implementation of joint education programmes, the introduction of the ECVET (European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System for VET) system and network curricula implementation are currently explored and will be shortly piloted.

In conclusion it should be stressed that despite the challenges facing the VET system in Russia under the impact of external and internal factors, there is a clear vision of the steps to take to meet the set objectives that aim at high quality training of competent workforce for Russia’s economy.

Bibliography


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