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QUALITY ASSESSMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION: ARE RUSSIAN UNIVERSITIES FOCUSED ON THE EDUCATIONAL NEEDS OF STUDENTS?

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Abstract: *The article touches on the issue of meeting the students' educational needs as a crucial point in the quality of education improvement. The main consumers of educational services are students whose perceptions of the educational quality is analysed. According to the research the primary attention of the administration have be paid to the dissatisfaction of the consumer and only then to ensure the satisfaction. The focus on the factors causing negative evaluation and dissatisfaction of students, using tactics quick fix ("quick patch") is recommended.*

Keywords: *quality of education, quality assurance, sociology of education, customer feedback, customer satisfaction assessment, student voice*

1. Introduction

The modern economics is characterized by increasing demands for quality of goods and services. Quality is the most preferable indicator in characteristic of competitiveness (Arsovski and Lazić, 2010; Bordovsky *et al.*, 2008). Building competitive advantages, the competitive battle for the consumers, in essence, the search for ways to achieve high quality and high performance in education (Barber and Mourshed, 2007). There are basic features of elite universities, to be evaluated and support: "highly qualified faculty, excellence in research results, quality of teaching and learning, high levels of government and nongovernment sources of funding, international and highly talented students, academic freedom, well-defined autonomous governance structures, and well-

equipped facilities for teaching, research, administration, and often student life" (Salmi, 2009; Putnik and Ávila, 2015).

Since the first evaluation conducted at Harvard University in the early 1920s (Solinas *et al.*, 2012) and then conducted worldwide, the opinions of students attending university education have represented the core of the evaluation of the quality of education (Abdullah, 2006).

If universities understand that educational activity is service and students are consumers of educational institutions (Sines and Duckworth, 1994; Lomas, 2007), then demands of students have to be recognized and managed. Students as consumers know what they need in universities; it seems to be not only knowledge and skills, but comfortable conditions, safety, innovative equipment, actual methods of teaching and so on. But it is necessary to recognize needs accurately to improve then educational process and educational context. Appropriate

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feedback methods coming from business to listen “student voice” in academic surrounding are useful. As understanding of quality of education is changing to become more democratic and service oriented, as outcomes of education are growing to satisfy customers and stakeholders (Gao, 2012; Kolesnikov and Lebedeva, 2013).

However, it is not correct to consider education quality just only like service category. It has a profound personal impact that has significant social value and cannot be reduced just to commodity-market relations. Education is under the public and government attention like no other activities. It’s obvious in the framework of political campaigns, when the education quality question is generally regarded as an element of national security, the prospects for economic growth and country development (Bordovsky *et al.*, 2008).

Trying to find solution to integrate social and economic nature of education, a number of experts consider educational services to the category of "multisocial good" (Carnoy, 1993). However, regardless of the approach most of researchers take into account consumer model of students (Stiglitz, 1997). There are some classifications of consumer behavior on the market of education (McArthur, 2011). There is no doubt that student’ voice is the most valuable in the quality assurance and quality management systems in higher educational institutions, so systematic student surveys became common practice for universities in Russia as well as worldwide. However, there are many issues using feedback information in universities for continuous improvement, because of inadequate methods of analyzing, weak of quality standards, lack of resources or even resistance of staff (Motova, Pykkö, 2012).

2. Frameworks and limitations

Nowadays students have a great possibility to choose educational program, university or country. They are becoming the main power

for university competitiveness if student feedback could be applied at the regular basis. It seems to be important for universities to take into account fully structured data of student expectations, needs, satisfaction, preferences and individual circumstances as well as actual trends in quality assurance and best practices.

One more aspect is important in our research. It’s well known phenomenon of independence of satisfaction and dissatisfaction (Herzberg, 1961). It means that absent of any dissatisfaction not leading to satisfaction and vice versa. In the approach any dissatisfaction of individual could be crucial factor for motivation at the time that satisfaction could be achieved partly, have grade, level or degree. So, the primary attention of the university should be paid to the factors of dissatisfaction of the consumer (student) to achieve better result.

3. Main part

3.1. Sampling methods

During the research non-probability sampling methods were used. First, voluntary selection sampling was applied by inviting all the students known by the organisers to take part in the research. Data were collected from those who have responded. At the next part of sampling, students who passed the survey were asked to encourage other students they knew to get involved. The group of respondents progressively expanded as a “snowball” (Fink, 2010). This method of sampling is cheap and easy to use.

Interview methods including online interview are not new one, but good enough for qualitative and quantitative research in the case of student survey (Lawrenz and Lonning 1991; Elliot, 2005; Scott, 2008; Fink, 2010).

3.2. Questionnaires' design

Targeted to develop a research framework, relevant sources were reviewed to define factors relating to quality in university. Most of ideas we took from the Program of strategic development of the Herzen State Pedagogical University of Russia (Herzen University or HSPUR) based on accreditation indicators of Ministry of Education and Science of Russian Federation and from European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Higher Education Area (ENQA, 2009). However, a number of items identified from previous experience of authors were added taking into consideration continuity of the data from early stage of the research.

The questionnaire contained 19 questions. 5-point Likert rating scale was used to obtain representative opinions about the subject.

3.3. Data collection

The study results presents the next stage of the education quality research made in the Herzen State Pedagogical University of Russia. Common assessment of the quality of education in the University obtained during first stage of the research in June 2012 and presented in the article then (Krokinskaya, 2013). The aims of the study are: a) determinate specific factors of educational quality based on student opinion, b) estimate level of student satisfaction (dissatisfaction). We didn't plan to compare data from two stage, we only made frameworks of next stage based on common results.

The survey questionnaire contains items on teaching quality, motivation, satisfaction and services. It was compiled in anonymous by the students that attending the courses of the Herzen State Pedagogical University of Russia.

During the research some new data were published by the Russian Foundation of Public Opinion (FPO, 2014). They presented results of the survey on quality of higher education in Russia included opinions of young people in the age of 18-25 which are consonant with our research (Russian Foundation of Public Opinion, 2014). Thus we tried to compare our findings with the results of the Foundation in matched part of questionnaire.

The data in the survey were collected by an online questionnaires' in the mode of natural selection of students.

There took part 340 students of 14 University faculties in the first survey during 15-20 February 2014. There were attended 250 students of 20 faculties in the second survey during 25-30 June 2014.

The FPO survey was selected for comparison of appropriate group: young people in the age of 18-25 (502 respondents).

We rely on the published descriptions of the respondents, consider the data heterogeneous.

All obtained data were visualized and analyzed using the MS Excel software.

3.4. Respondent characteristics

Surprisingly, although Herzen University is a Pedagogical one, the majority of respondents (Figure 1), who took part in our survey, study on non-teaching professions (66,5%), but on humanity faculties (84%). We were not able to control this setting, because participation in the survey was voluntary, and the information about the survey was sent to all departments equally. The most of respondents were women (85%), 15% were men, reflecting a feature of Herzen University as a university specialized on humanities.

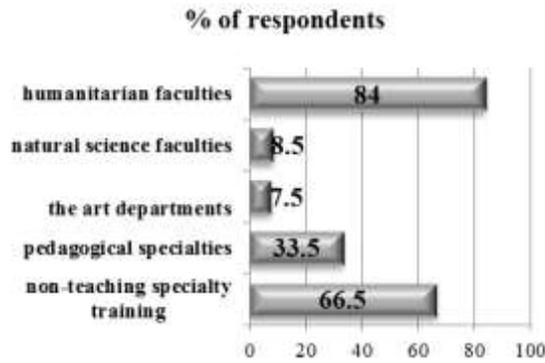


Figure 1. Distribution of respondents according to their faculties and programs

Distribution of respondents by course looks fairly evenly based on the percentage of undergraduate and graduate programs in Herzen University (Figure 2). Probably a fair hypothesis that the students' opinions

regarding the quality of education can vary from course to course, but in this case it was important to get a whole picture, and not to establish differences in opinion depending on certain factors.

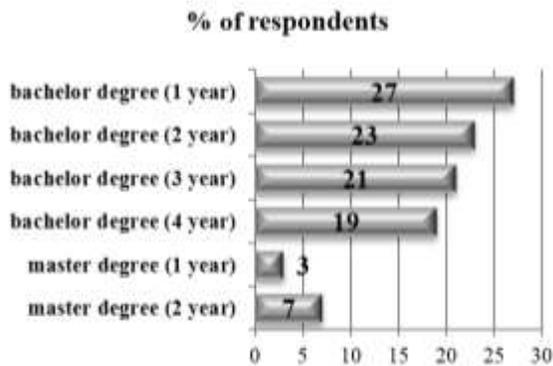


Figure 2. Distribution of respondents by year and level of education

3.5. Assessment of higher education quality in Russia according to the Russian youth and Herzen University students: comparative analysis

A comparative assessment of education quality of the survey participants - HSPUR students and respondents FPO - Russian youth was conducted on 6 questions included the questionnaire FPO.

1) *Do you rather agree or disagree that the Russian higher education, higher*

pedagogical education and education in Herzen University is generally modern, meets the needs of the economy and the development needs of society in the twenty-first century? (only one answer is possible)

Figure 3 shows us how Russian youth and Herzen University students assess the quality of Russian education needs of modern economy and public needs (only one answer possible).

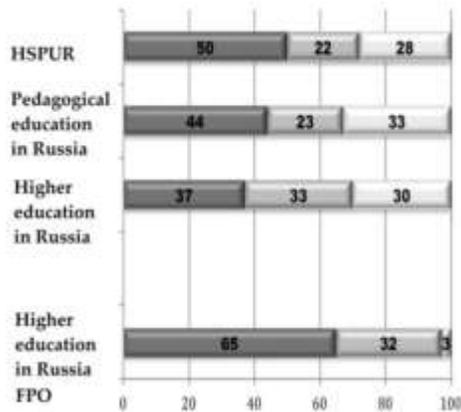


Figure 3. Match the quality of Russian education needs of modern economy and social needs

Assessment of the education quality (especially Russian higher education in general), given by Herzen University students, more restrained, due, apparently, to a greater homogeneity of the sample, and, in our opinion, largely reflects the real situation than the survey results FPO.

2) *Do you rather agree or disagree that the Russian higher education should be more application-oriented on development of modern professional skills?* (only one answer possible).

Figure 4 reflects the attitude of the Russian youth and Herzen University students to the applied orientation of Russian education.

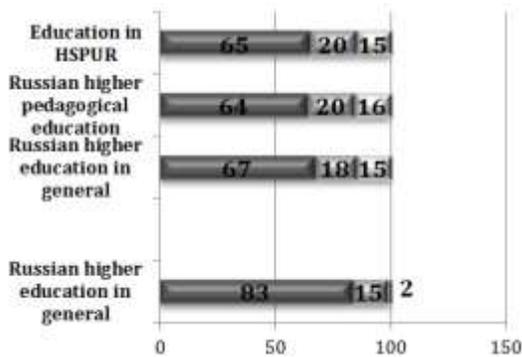


Figure 4. The focus of Russian education for the professional skills development

As we can see, this requirement reflects the opinion most of Russian youth and Herzen University students and in this regard is the priority of improving the quality of education for Russian universities.

3) *Do you rather agree or disagree that the main criterion of education quality at the University should be considered a high*

demand of graduates in the labour market? (only one answer possible).

Figure 5 shows the relationship of the Russian youth and Herzen University students to the employability of graduates in the labour market as the main criterion for assessing the quality of education.

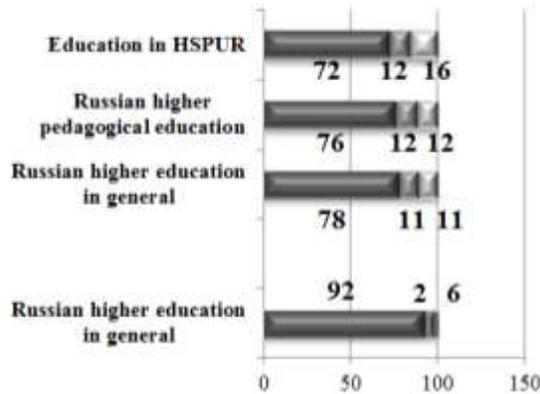


Figure 5. The demand for graduates in the labour market as the main criterion of quality education

Slightly less than in the survey FPO, the percentage of Herzen University respondents, consider that it is the main indicator of education quality, due, perhaps, not very high concern Herzen University students about their employment, because by this measure, the University demonstrates the best results in the region.

4) *Do you rather agree or disagree that it is necessary to strengthen state control over the higher education quality?* (only one answer possible).

Figure 6 shows the attitude of the Russian youth and Herzen University students to the need to strengthen state control over the quality of education (only one answer possible).

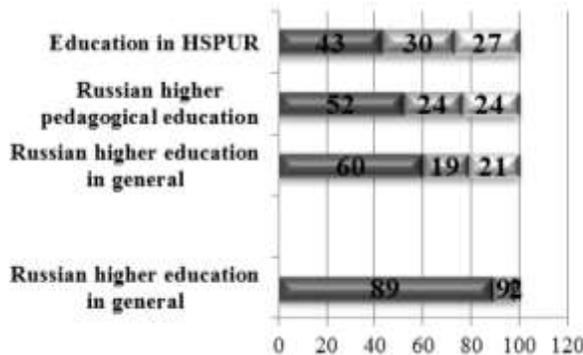


Figure 6. The need to strengthen state control over the higher education quality

A significantly higher proportion of Herzen University students, resisting for strengthen of state control the percentage of students agreeing with this statement, perhaps, may imply that the recognition of their high level of quality education in Herzen University and the ability of the University management to provide without external pressure.

Note that the problem of enhanced control over the higher education quality, including state control requires a separate study. Most likely unfamiliar to the global context of the question and the high level of agreement with the possibility and necessity of state control over the education quality can be explained by a complex ideology of the Russian mass consciousness and social life.

On the one hand, they provide the understanding necessary for effective operation of all systems, but almost no idea about other means of regulation of processes of society, rather than government. Including, almost don't notice the contradiction between the state paradigm of regulation of education and installation on the high level of individualization, as evidenced by the following results of the survey.

Do you rather agree or disagree that it is necessary to make higher education more individualized, focused on the needs of a specific student? (only one answer possible).

Figure 7 reflects the opinion of the Russian youth and HSPUR students to the need for individualization of Russian higher education and its stronger focus on the educational needs of students.

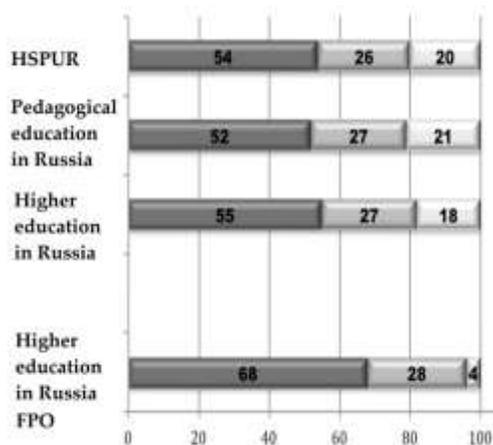


Figure 7. The orientation of the Russian higher education on the students' educational needs

5) *Do you rather agree or disagree that it is necessary first of all to support the best HEI in the country? (only one answer possible).*

Significantly lower percentage of Herzen University students supporting this point of state policy, can be explained, in our view, for two reasons. Firstly, Herzen University students, apparently, tend not to include the own University to the elite of Russian higher education, despite the fact that the University is very good looks in the national and world rankings of universities.

Figure 8 shows the attitude of the Russian youth and HSPUR students to current public policy priority support elite universities in the country.

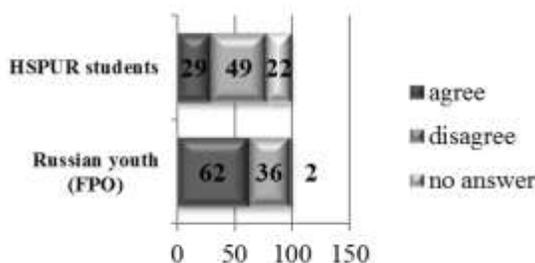


Figure 8. The priority of public support of the best Russian universities

Significantly lower percentage of Herzen University students supporting this point of state policy, can be explained, in our view, for two reasons. Firstly, Herzen University students, apparently, tend not to include the own University to the elite of Russian higher education, despite the fact that the University is very good looks in the national and world rankings of universities. And this fact raises again the question of what we should be guided in our work to improve the quality of education ratings or opinions of our students? In addition, it raises the question about the necessity of more active PR achievements of the University. The second reason for this result, in our opinion, is the high level of commitment to justice and the rejection of paternalism characteristic of Herzen University students due to the nature and traditions of the University. Perhaps they, like many in the academic community, fear that the increased differentiation of higher education institutions and inequality of access to resources (primarily financial) will lead to an improvement and deterioration of the situation in Russian higher education, if the government will not provide a "living wage" for universities, not listed to "elite".

3.6. Factors and the conditions influencing an assessment of quality of education

The results of the second survey (the first in time) significantly complement, extend and elaborate on data presented above, presenting them in a form that is understandable and easy to implement practical actions to improve the quality of education.

6) *Are you satisfied with the learning environment in Herzen University?*

Figure 9 and Figure 10 well reveal how the structure of the factors that have a decisive influence on the perception of education quality and differences in the level of excellence in specific areas of University activity.

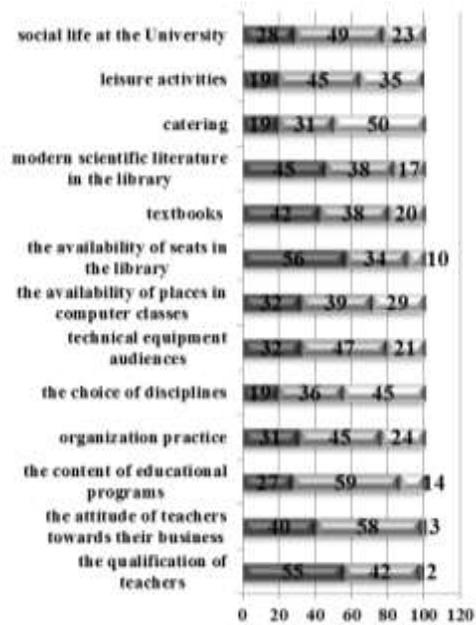


Figure 9. The degree of satisfaction with the learning environment

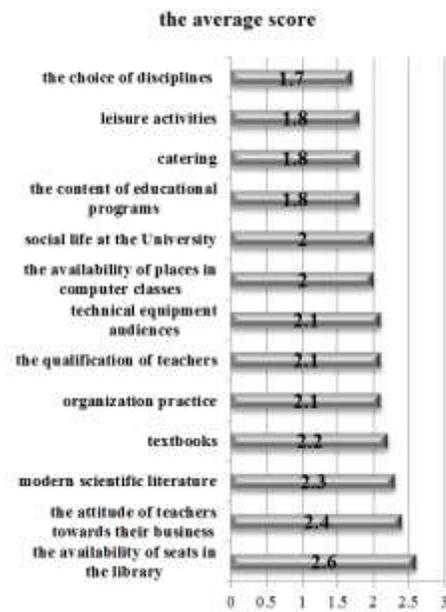


Figure 10. The General structure of satisfaction with the learning environment (average score on a scale of 1-3, where 1 is the lowest level of satisfaction, 3 - high level of satisfaction)

While the priorities of the University to improve the quality of education should be the factors that have a weighted average score less than 2 points (choice of courses for personal development, catering and leisure, the content of the educational programs). These data explain the assessments made in the second survey (Figures 4, 7).

The following information details the results shown in Figures 9 and 10, with certain indicators.

7) *With what factors students can evaluate the work of the teacher?*

When answering this question (Figure 11) the respondents had to choose 5-6 indicators, the most adequate in the opinion of the students reflects the quality of teaching.

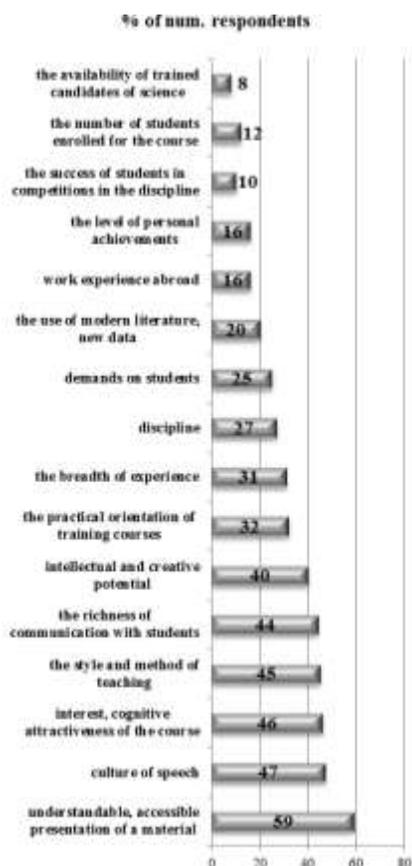


Figure 11. The performance of teachers

As is shown on Figure 11, students adequately present their capabilities for the evaluation of teachers, and distinguish among the indicators precisely those areas where they can, and should, be experts. The main attention of students is drawn to those aspects of teachers activity that are associated with the process of their direct interaction with students, and reflect the level of development of teachers communicative competence. Very high assessment of the expression level of this and other HSPUR teachers competencies reflect Figures 12 and 13.

8) *What qualities peculiar faculty of your University?*

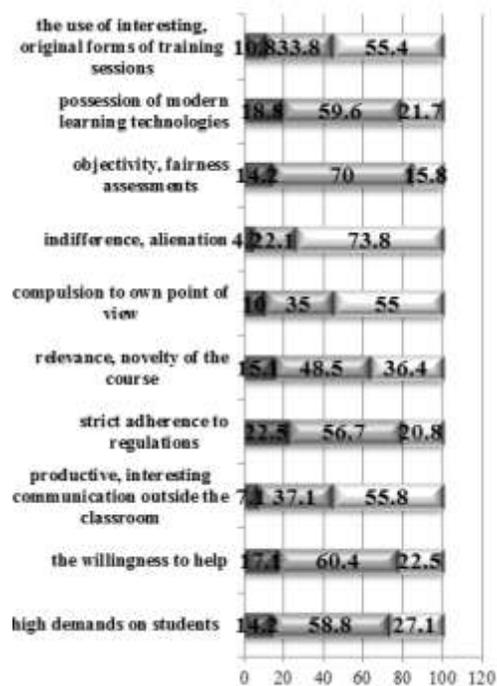


Figure 12. Quality, characteristic for Herzen University teachers

It can be seen at Figure 13, that with an overall positive assessment of the teaching quality the most high HSPUR students assess the objectivity of marks offered them by teachers, which confirms our conclusion about the students' opinions regarding the

ability of the University independently, without external pressure, provide a high level of quality education.

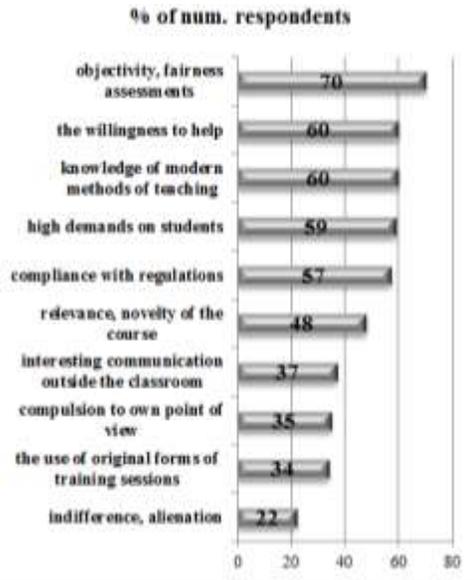


Figure 13. Quality, characteristic for the most Herzen University teachers

At the same time, causes some concern percentage indifferent, alienated teachers (22%). It certainly must concern the University supervisors.

9) *The extent to which different elements of the training process exert developmental influence on you?*

The following data demonstrate which elements of the educational process (teachers work) have on students' greatest development impact (Figures 14 and 15), what due to their interest in learning (Figure16) and what is the complexity of learning in the University (Figure17).

Important here seems to emphasize the fact that the vast majority of students feel real positive changes in the level of development, as evidenced by the relatively low percentage of answers "never" (2-17%).

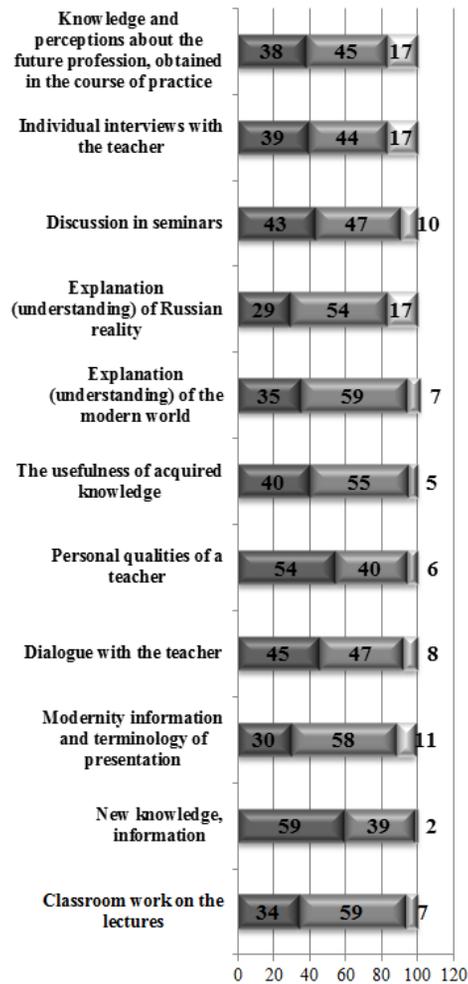


Figure 14. The elements of the educational process, providing educational impact on students

As can be seen at Figure 15, the greatest educational impact on students has the relevance of educational information and the identity of the teacher.



Figure 15. The elements of the educational process that have the greatest developmental impact on students

Figure 16 demonstrates that these requirements in Herzen University are provided, keeping a sufficiently high interest of students (64%).

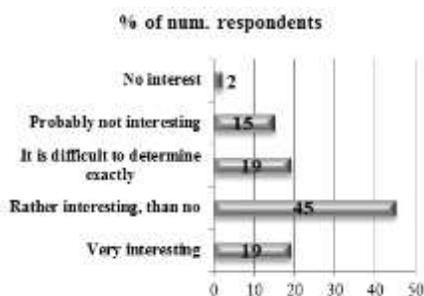


Figure 16. Interest in learning

10) Please rate the degree of difficulty of your training in Herzen University.

Figure 17 shows the opinion of HSPUR students about the complexity of education in the University. Alarming a large proportion of those who point out the ease of studying at University - it is almost 50% of the responses. According to other data (essay students of 1 course "The University is different from school?"), value judgments were in the nature of a disappointment ("did not expect that it would be so easy, preparing for greater complexity"). It is wrong to cheat such expectations. Of course, this opinion, especially distributed in the environment, reduces the prestige of the University. It is obvious that this should serve as a guide to future action for teachers and administration.

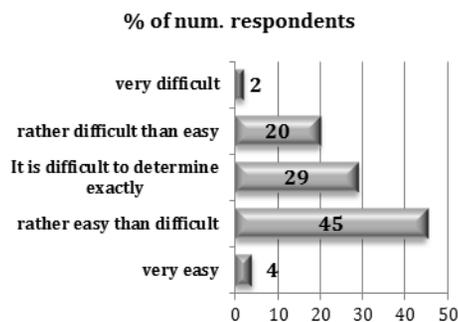


Figure 17. The complexity of learning in Herzen University

The next set of questions on a five-point scale assessed the organization quality of important element of the educational process - student practice (Figure 18).

11) Evaluate the effectiveness of student vocational training.

Figure 18 shows the structure of the factors influencing the assessment of the vocational training, common understanding of the significance of which for the highest result of education is at a critical level (Figure 10). It is obvious that the improvement of practice should be one of the priorities of the University to improve the quality of education.

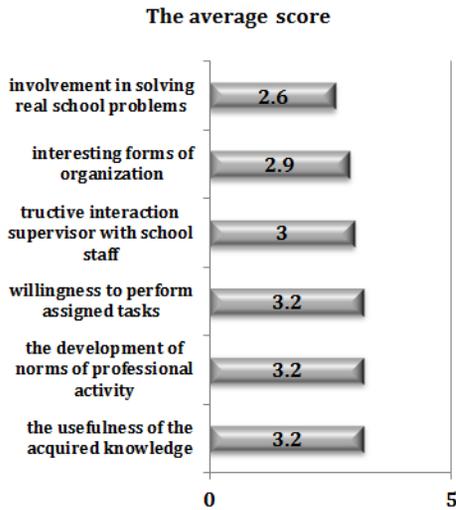


Figure 18. The quality of vocational training

The following data characterize the main problems, reducing the level of satisfaction of students (Figure 19). *What problems of educational organization process you had to face?*

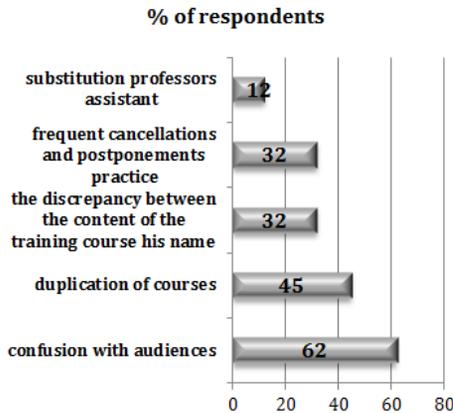


Figure 19. Problems of educational process organization

12) *Appreciate your Dean's office on a five-point scale.*

The most negative evaluation was given to the quality of the support staff work, a more detailed assessment is presented at a Figure 20.

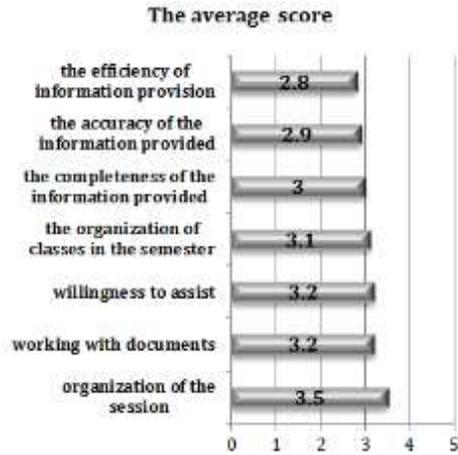


Figure 20. Evaluation of the deanery

The following data (Figures 21-23) contain some summary assessment of HSPUR students about the quality of education that they receive.

13) *Please rate the usefulness of your training in Herzen University nowadays.*

The evaluation was supposed to perform on a five-point scale (table. 1), while 1 matches "not useful" and 5 means "very useful". Respondents could give only one answer.

Table 1. Criteria of usefulness of training in HSPUR

criteria of usefulness	% of the respondents				
	1	2	3	4	5
to meet future professional tasks	8	17	28	37	10
for career growth	9	19	31	28	12
for personal development	2	13	21	35	30

It can be seen at Figure 21, that HSPUR students believe that the greatest impact the University has had on their personal development, and only to a minor degree associate it to their future professional activity and career.

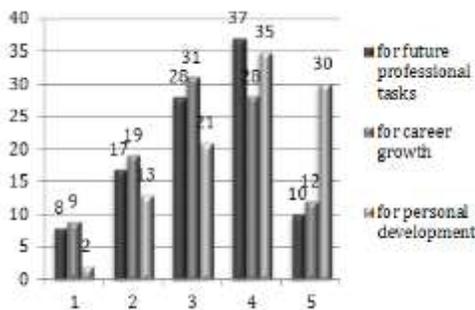


Figure 21. Usefulness of training in Herzen University

However, considering the main trend in Russian higher education, when it became normal to receive employment not by profession, we believe a very significant indicator of education quality subjective students perception of changes in the level of personal development, and exhibited 65% of HSPUR students the highest scores on this indicator is a very significant result.

The question about the criteria of usefulness University in the proposed format with the corresponding two-dimensional scale has shown its good performance (validity) and in other research projects (Krokinskaya, 2013). Therefore, it can be considered a universal test question and included in the measurement of education quality on any areas of training.

14) *Did your expectations in relation to learning in Herzen University come true?*

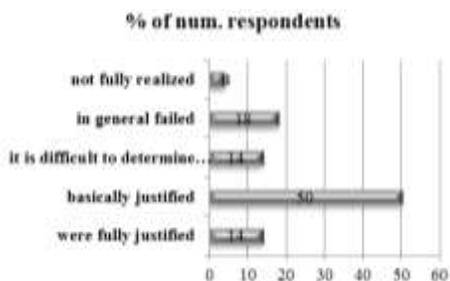


Figure 22. The propriety of expectations from training in WPC

The result shows that in general the propriety of expectations from teaching at the

University is quite high, but the percentage of students whose expectations are largely or completely failed is also high (22%).

15) *Would you make your choice in favour of Herzen University, if you enter the university today?*

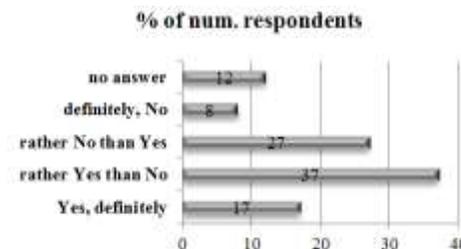


Figure 23. The willingness of Herzen University students to repeat their university choice

This result is depressing even more, and this is represented in the percentage of students who absolutely confidently confirmed the correctness of their choice, which is only 17%. Of course, this requires further detailed clarification and urgent attention of the leadership and faculty of the University. However, it should be noted that confidence in the choice today is generally unstable, depends on many factors and should be considered in the dynamics from first course to last.

It seems that furthermore this is due to the reluctance and unwillingness of pedagogical universities graduates to work in the field of education, which, to some extent confirms the analysis we made shown at Figure 20 data, and, in turn, is confirmed by the results of the answers to the last two questions of the questionnaire (Figures 24^a) and 24^b).

16) *In what area of work you would like to work after graduation?*

This question allowed multiple answers, but no more than 3-4.

17) *What are the reasons for the graduates of pedagogical universities are not going to work in the education system?* Respondents could give multiple answers to this question

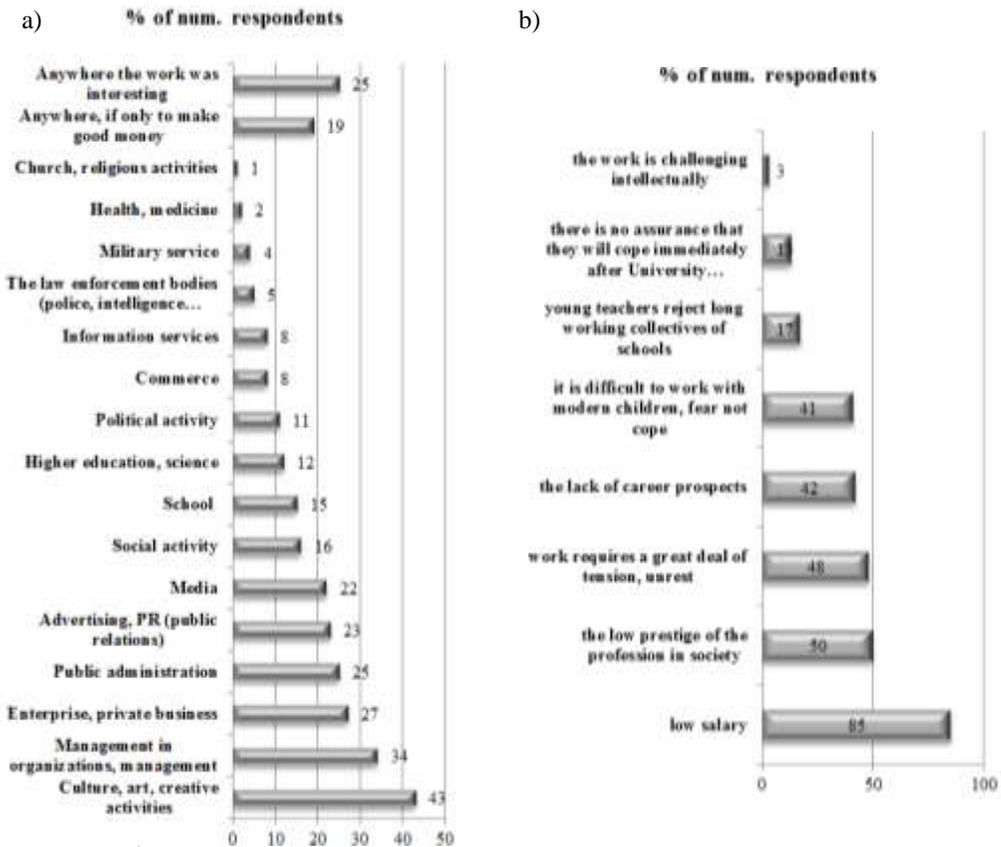


Figure 24. a) Preferred for Herzen University students activities upon completion of training; b) The reasons for the unavailability of Herzen University graduates to work in the education system

However, at Figure 24^{b)} it follows that if demotivating positions 1, 2 and 4 do not depend on the education, as it is the consequence of social conditions in the country, almost all the rest (3, 5, 6, 7, 8), perceived as challenges are directly dependent on the quality of training and vocational training.

4. Conclusions

In this article the authors have presented the results of students subjective perceptions of higher education quality and the degree of satisfaction with their educational needs analysis. On the one hand, the survey has showed quite a high assessment of students quality education. Indicator 64-65% of

positive assessments of the assessed indicators - the most common result of our research. It is likely that this is just the percentage of total positive attitudes towards the quality of education at the University from Herzen University students. On the other hand, result in 2/3 of a possible maximum makes us wonder about the adequacy of the efforts of the University. In essence, this result reveals considerable potential of the University to improve the quality of education and promoting growth of student satisfaction. The obtained data allow us to recommend to Herzen University, as well as other Russian universities, to improve the quality of higher education, focusing to the factors causing negative sides and dissatisfaction of

students, using tactics of quick fix ("quick patch"). However, it does not mean that the University should not strengthen its position in the indicators of education quality, which is highly evaluated by the students, because that is what students like and appreciate in their institution, this is the competitive advantages of the University. Such a two-pronged approach will force the University to think more about their students as the main consumers of educational services and better meet their educational needs and will

make them to be more attractive for students and more competitive.

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