MUTUAL TRUST AS A DEVELOPMENT RESOURCE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract

The relevance of the study is caused by the search for resources to restore mutual trust between the elements of the system of Russian higher education. In the conditions of educational reform and social uncertainty the links between educational groups (students, teachers, managers) have been deformed. There was also a disruption of the once integral links between universities in the regions and in Russia as a whole. There were gaps between universities and macro-level management structures.

The purpose of the study is to reveal the level of mutual trust between the main actors of the higher education system in the Russian macro-region – the Urals Federal District (UrFD). The tasks of the study were: 1) to identify the local of "weak" and "strong" trust; 2) determine the reasons for the reduction / preservation of mutual trust.

The object of empirical research was made by representatives of the main educational groups of universities of the UrFD. The subject is the relationship of trust between the main actors of higher education to each other. The article is based on the materials of a sociological research conducted in 2016-2017.

The methods of the study were expert interviews, a questionnaire survey of teachers and students, and secondary analysis of empirical research data on higher education in Russia. At the first stage the study included expert interviews with heads of universities, faculties and departments, representatives of the scientific and pedagogical group. There have been 30 interviews. At the second stage of the study a survey of students and teachers of universities of the UrFD was conducted. The sample size for the students was 1500, for teachers – 800.

The following main conclusions from the study were made.

1 There is a high level of mutual trust between students and teachers. However, a low level of trust on the part of students and teachers in the management of universities is recorded. The main reason for the decline in trust is determined by the dominance of an authoritarian management style.

2 There is a low level of trust between universities of different types in the Urals macro-region. The reason for this was the inequality of universities in higher education, generated by the state's educational policy. At the same time, a tendency has been found to overcome mistrust between universities, which are included in the practices of network interaction.

3 The low level of institutional trust of regional universities to the educational policy of the state is revealed. The reasons for this situation are the rejection of the goals of this policy and the constant change in the vector of educational reform.

Keywords: Mutual trust, institutional trust, higher education system, educational groups, network interaction.

INTRODUCTION

In complex social and economic conditions, the development of Russian universities depends greatly on non-material factors. The inconsistent reform of higher education and the situation of social uncertainty have disrupted the organic links between the elements of the higher education system both in the regions and in Russia in general. The connections between the members of the educational groups – the students, the teachers, and the administration – were deformed. There were gaps found between universities and macro-level management structures (the Ministry of Education and Science of the Russian Federation).
To restore the mechanisms of reproduction and the effectiveness of the higher education system in Russia, it is necessary to find resources for the formation of organic links between the key elements of this system. One of such resources appears to be mutual trust between universities, as well as between the educational groups. The author assumes that the system of higher education has acquired a mechanistic character due to the gradual loss of mutual trust between its elements. This trust is the basis of interpersonal communication between the entrants, their parents, the students, and the teachers. Trust determines the value of the educational and scientific knowledge that universities produce. Trust is the basis of inter-university networks and partnerships of universities with stakeholders [1]. Institutional trust determines the success of reforms in higher education and the level of resistance to innovation, since both reforms and innovations are launched by the universities themselves but by the macro-regulator – the government and the Ministry of Education and Science of the Russian Federation.

The capital of mutual trust in higher education is especially significant under conditions when institutional norms "do not work" or when the result of educational or scientific activity is delayed in time. Education and science in this sense can be considered to be «trust services», as the consumer pays for them «for future use», trusting the reputation of the university [2].

The purpose of our study was to determine in which spheres of higher education in Russia and to what extent the mutual trust capital between the main actors of higher education is preserved. The objectives of the study were: 1) to identify the locus of «weak» and «strong» trust; 2) to determine the reasons for the reduction / preservation of mutual trust.

The topic of mutual trust in European and Russian science is being elaborated in several different directions, since the basic conditions for the formation and functioning of educational systems in different countries varies. Meanwhile, a review of theoretical developments and empirical studies shows a sustainable interest in this topic and the achievement of significant results by the researchers from all the countries.

The problem of trust between teachers and students has been elaborated to a great extent. For example, G.D. Hendry, S.J. Hyde, P. Davy investigated the support of mutual trust between students in research micro-groups [3]. The method of confidential dialogue was proposed as a basis for changing relations between the students and the teachers [4; 5]. J.R. Malin and D.G. Hackmann justified the productive possibilities of trust between professors and doctoral students in the mentoring sphere [6]. The study of W. Akili was focused on the role of «caring» professor, whom students trust [7]. The issue of trust was studied through a different perspective – as seen through the prism of the authority of professors and confidence in the knowledge [8], and depending on the credibility of the previous life experiences of the students [9].

The problem of trust between the teachers and the university administration has been elaborated to a lesser extent. Some studies are focused on the issue of trust towards the administration, which is based on the transparency of their activities [10]. Moreover, trust is being studied in the framework of organizational changes within the University [11]. Meanwhile, in the Russian sociology this aspect of mutual trust is seen as the most topical issues related to the system of higher education [12; 13; 14]. Due to the management system of higher education in Russia, researchers have actualized the problem of institutional confidence in the governing structures [15].

2 METHODOLOGY

The study of mutual trust in higher education in Russia is one of the directions of the large study «The formation of a nonlinear model of higher education in the region in conditions of social and economic uncertainty». This research was conducted by a scientific group of sociologists of the Ural Federal University in 2016-2017 and included several stages. During the first stage (2016) a deep semi-formalized interview was conducted with experts – heads of universities, faculties and departments, representatives of the scientific and pedagogical group, researchers of higher education problems. A total of 80 interviews were conducted in different regions of Russia, including the Urals Federal District – 30 interviews.

During the second stage of the study (2017), a mass survey of students and teachers of the universities of the Urals Federal District was conducted. Altogether, the sample included 51 educational organizations. All the regions of the Ural Federal District were represented by the Universities: Sverdlovsk, Chelyabinsk, Tyumen, Kurgan regions, Khanty-Mansi Autonomous District.
The Yamalo-Nenets Autonomous District was not included in the sample, since there are no independent universities there. In each region, quotas were administered in the areas of training (engineering, science, humanitarian, and socio-economic one). The sample of the total number of teachers included 800 people, the sample size of the students included 1500 people. The data related to the secondary analysis of empirical studies of higher education in Russia was also used by the authors. The scale of the empirical research enabled us to form an overall picture of mutual trust in Russian higher education and, more specifically, in higher education of the Ural Federal District.

3 RESULTS

3.1 Institutional trust

The first symptoms of critical situation related to the level of trust the educational policy of the state and the management structures that develop it were registered by the expert interviews. Even those experts who are generally positive about the strategy for reforming Russian education have shared their negative comments about the strategies of its implementation:

«Russian universities in the 1990’s were as autonomous as possible. I remember the rector of one pedagogical institute said that he had not been to the Ministry for 10 years and was not going to go there. I cannot imagine him saying the same at the last meeting… Recently the rectors of the two universities, were dismissed publicly. One of them was on vacation at that time, and he was dismissed simply because he had not rush from Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk to Moscow to listen to the “wise” speeches of the minister. So there he was relieved of duty» (A.C., a Vice-Rector).

«Instability of legislation hampers our universities, there are no clear guidelines. It is not clear how one can develop for the benefit of the country, the region, personally for people engaged in education. This is the main issue!» (G.K., professor).

A mass survey of teachers at the Ural universities showed that the major part of the scientific and pedagogical community, does not accept the policy related to the higher education (see Table 1). Teachers do not feel confident about this policy and do not associate themselves with it.

Table 1. Teachers of universities on the trust in educational policy, implemented by different levels of government, % of the respondents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Do you trust...</th>
<th>Rather yes</th>
<th>Probably not</th>
<th>Difficult to answer</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The educational policy of the Russian Federation regarding higher education (at present time) currently</td>
<td>18.4</td>
<td>66.1</td>
<td>15.5</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regional authorities responsible for social policy in higher education</td>
<td>17.5</td>
<td>56.1</td>
<td>26.4</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ministry (department) of education in the region, responsible for making management decisions on reforming the higher education</td>
<td>16.8</td>
<td>53.3</td>
<td>29.9</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The educational policy of the municipal government</td>
<td>20.7</td>
<td>45.2</td>
<td>34.1</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
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</table>

The survey showed that the objectives of higher education reform are not perceived by the professional community as meaningful and acceptable to Russian society. Methods of implementation of the educational policy are criticized harshly by the university professors. Actions of administrative structures of various levels are seen as imposed, tough, and repressive.

The results of the survey and expert interviews showed that the reason for the sharp decrease in the trust of teachers to management structures is associated with a change in the mission of higher education. In the educational policy, higher education is being positioned as means of something (entering the international educational space, driver of the economic development of the region, etc.). Teachers of universities continue to believe that the institutional functions of higher education are much broader, they have a terminal character. A low level of trust in educational policy demonstrates its essential defect – the lack of focus on the human, for whom higher education is actually carried out.
The generalization and analysis of management practices in the system of higher education show that the management of higher education (the replacement of academic management with administrative management) is associated with a decrease in the mutual trust of management structures among university professors. Proof of this is the total introduction of external systems for monitoring the activities of teachers. They represent a highly formalized assessment of the quality of teaching, scientific activity, labor discipline. The Ministry and departments do not trust the internal evaluation systems that were developed by the academic community. Here are the words that testify to the typical reaction of teachers to bureaucratic control:

«One can get an impression that the state is not interested in increasing the number of teachers that hold a certain degree. Otherwise, there would be no such obstacles for the work of dissertation councils, academic advisers, candidate and doctoral students themselves. There is no support, no understanding. We are facing the situation of crime and punishment. ... You need to trust this community. One should not put this community in the position of a criminal, whom you need to monitor, control strictly and customize. There exists professional ethics, professional culture, professional responsibility. Within the scientific community, everyone knows who has achieved something, what he’s worth, who has what level and degree of scientific responsibility. This attitude offends, demotivates» (V.O, a Chair Head, Professor).

3.2 Trust among educational groups

The study showed that teachers of the Ural universities have a certain level of trust referring to their colleagues (85.4 % of respondents) and students (75.4 %). The level of their trust is much lower – to the administration of the university, where they work (47.1 %) and the policy of reform, which is carried out by it (36.4 %). Similar results are being shown by the students. Most of all they trust their teachers (74.6 %), fellow students (74,1 %), as for the faculty administrations – 51.4 %, university administration – 40.8 %. The students are less likely to trust educational policy referring to the students (34.8 %) and the educational policy of the Russian Federation regarding higher education (27 %).

The evaluation results that are shown by the teachers and refer to the principles of relations between educational communities (see Table 2) are even more striking. According to the table, we can conclude that there are two poles of relations. One of them characterizes the connections between the teachers and the students, and within the scientific and pedagogical group as well. Another one describes the connection between the management of the university and the teachers. In the first case, the type of relations is based on the positive principles of trust, partnership, information openness, mutual understanding, mutual assistance, mutual respect, and tolerance. In the second, the type of relations is determined by the strict regulation, observance of formal rules and social distance, corporate closeness. We can hardly call such relations organic. They do not allow the university to function as a complete system. In addition to the results of the survey, we give a transcript of one of the interviews:

«Administrators in the universities are tightly incorporated into the same chain of command, it is important for them to identify the dominant trend and adjust to it. They have a basis idea they stick to – do not violate the boundaries of the existing system. ... They are more engaged in paper and bureaucratic work for themselves. This group has become self-sufficient, completely detached from the educational process. It is enough to know who our rectors are today? Are they teachers? Scholars? Nor teachers, neither scholars. And here you go – that is who your managers are: here they are drawing squares and ticks on the paper, optimizing from "here" to "there"» (E.Z., a Chair Head, Professor).
### Table 2. Teachers' opinions on the principles on which relations are based at the university, % of the respondents*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Principles</th>
<th>Between teachers and students</th>
<th>Among teachers</th>
<th>Between the management of the university and the teachers</th>
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<tr>
<td>Trust, partnership</td>
<td>54,0</td>
<td>62,4</td>
<td>17,9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information openness</td>
<td>43,1</td>
<td>35,1</td>
<td>17,7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tight regulation of relations</td>
<td>9,1</td>
<td>5,0</td>
<td>43,6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tolerance</td>
<td>39,1</td>
<td>39,2</td>
<td>16,9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observance of formal rules of interaction</td>
<td>29,5</td>
<td>22,5</td>
<td>44,7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observance of social distance</td>
<td>22,3</td>
<td>10,3</td>
<td>39,1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corporate Closure</td>
<td>6,1</td>
<td>5,7</td>
<td>31,4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mutual understanding, mutual assistance, mutual respect</td>
<td>41,2</td>
<td>53,7</td>
<td>13,3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*The total number of answers exceeds 100 %, because respondents had the opportunity to choose several answer options.

As for student evaluations, they are very close to teaching. According to the students, the basic principles are – mutual understanding, mutual respect (47.9 %), trust and partnerships (44.6 %), information openness (44.3 %), tolerance (34.8 %).

However, we should not idealize relations between the teachers and the students, which look more positive in teachers' assessments than their relations with the university's management. According to Table 2, the level of trust, partnership, mutual understanding, mutual assistance and mutual respect is higher between teachers than between them and the students. Obviously, interaction and communication between the teachers and the students at the university have undergone significant transformation in recent years. Each educational community has serious demands to one another.

The nature of their interaction was largely influenced by the two factors – qualitative structural and functional changes in both educational communities and structural and organizational restructuring of educational processes in the university. The reduction in the number of teachers at the universities and, at the same time, their desire to increase the enrollment of students led to the massification of the educational process and its transformation to the electronic environment. Optimization of financial costs leads to the formation of large training flows, the automation of the learning process through the use of electronic educational products and test tools for evaluation.

Another objective reason for the decline in both quality and quantity communication between teachers and students is the lack of time for the former and the lack of proper motivation for the latter. According to the researchers, the decrease in real and productive communication with students is part of the strategy of opportunism regarding some group of the teachers under the conditions of increasingly heavy workload.

In general, the study showed the preservation of mutual trust between students and teachers, although relations of trust have been distorted regarding certain aspects. Speaking about the students, their trust in teachers as holders of actual knowledge has decreased. Speaking about the teachers, their trust in the students' ability to treat education faithfully and to be active independent subjects has declined. A low level of trust of students and teachers to the management of universities has been recorded.

### 3.3 Mutual trust between universities

An important result of the study was the fixation of the low level of trust between Russian universities of different types. This situation was caused by inequality and disintegration in the sphere of education, generated by the educational policy of the state. Today we see a strong disunity and distance between universities from one another. This situation is aggravated by the artificially maintained level of competition through the «5-100» project. Competitive struggle for financial support within the framework of this project generates tough competitive relations between universities. In
addition, there are growing tensions and inequality between universities in metropolitan cities and regions.

How is this perceived by the scientific and pedagogical community? Here are some comments of our experts:

«Of course, it's good when universities receive additional funding in the framework of this program. However, all the rest is left behind. But other universities are also part of the system, and certain tasks are also set for them, but they have to find the means to solve their problems themselves. This is a situation of inequality, competition between universities. And it is not always justified, it does not bring positive results» (A.B., a Professor).

«The lobby of leading universities has already lost all the decency and common sense! It is clear that the incredible amount of money flows in order to support to the program "5-100". I would not mind this at all, but make sure that other universities receive support as well» (I.P., a Professor).

Educational groups are aware of this strange situation and keep a critical eye on it. According to the results of the mass survey, we see that the overwhelming majority of educators believe that highly competitive relations (as in a market economy) have no prospects, since they do not provide improvement in the quality of higher education. Only 12.2% of respondents assess this relationship in a positive way. However, 75.4% are in favour of cooperation between universities within the framework of different models of partnerships. Despite the fact that many universities, especially those implementing the project «5-100», are guided in the choice of partners to foreign universities, most teachers regard this choice in a negative way. Only 4.9% of respondents support this idea. 22.5% are in favour of cooperation, primarily with Russian partners, while 66.9% are in favour of cooperation with both foreign and Russian universities. In the framework of the study of network inter-university projects implemented within the Ural Federal District, we have been observing the tendency to overcome mistrust between universities, which are included in the practice of network interaction.

4 CONCLUSIONS

We characterize the modern higher education in Russia as a mechanistic system in which the capital of mutual trust between the main actors is critically low. The mechanistic system of higher education is characterized by the crisis of deep real ties between the higher education institutions, educational communities, higher education institutions and the management of higher education. The capital of mutual trust is still present referring to the relations between the key educational communities and within them. It is also being strengthened by the network interaction between the universities. Unfortunately, there are only few network projects and this trend is only beginning to develop in Russia.

An alarming symptom of the higher education imbalance in Russia was the identification of the low level of institutional trust in the management of the higher education system at the macro level. The relationship between the universities and the structures of the Ministry of Education and Science of the Russian Federation resembles the pathways of «the scattering galaxies». This situation becomes a powerful barrier to the development of the higher education in Russia.

The problem is that every actor of the higher education system has its own goals, which are different of one another, own images of the future and ideas concerning their implementation. The lack of trust capital acts as a barrier for the reform of higher education in Russia. Despite the critical perception of the higher education reform, objectively, it needs to be carried out. However, the development and implementation of the positive and constructive project aimed at the higher education transformation could be only based on the organic bonds and a powerful capital of trust to each other.

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