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► Career guidance in times of the pandemic

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The period of remote learning showed that the vast majority of young people is not ready for productive self-study in a digital educational environment. Neither schools and colleges, nor universities prepare students for continuous, effective online self-education, despite such readiness becoming one of the leading requirements of modern employers, especially in the cutting-edge technology sectors.

The digital transformation of education is one of the federal priorities of the Russian Federation. Its implementation in the system of Vocational Education is designed to provide effective training for the digital economy. The study of the process of digitalization of Secondary Vocational Education (SPE) and the identification of organizational and pedagogical conditions of its effectiveness are carried out on the basis of an interregional network of experimental sites – professional educational organizations which have been implementing online learning programmes for several years. The problems and limitations associated with the introduction of online teaching in the system of SPE, as well as possible solutions, are considered. It is shown that distance learning technology can be used in the implementation of SPE programmes only in force majeure circumstances (forced self-isolation under pandemic conditions) and is accompanied by a significant loss of quality of education and its practice-oriented nature. Forced self-isolation revealed the main problem of digital transformation of Vocational Education: the lack of general competence of teachers, students, and parents. The optimal form of introducing online courses into the SPE educational process is blended learning technology which combines online work with contact forms of learning. The key condition for the effectiveness of digital transformation of the educational process is teachers' mastering of a set of general competencies, including self-organization, remote management of motivation, and work with granular learning content.

I. Changes in career guidance work with students

The pandemic situation required switching to a remote format of career guidance work with students in colleges, universities, and specialized career guidance center (both state and private). This challenge turned out to be a serious problem since in recent years the emphasis in the development of early career guidance in Russia has been on practice-oriented forms of work (vocational tryouts, enterprise visits, meetings with specialists, master classes, open days, etc.).

Under these conditions, each region and each organization independently built a strategy for transforming their career guidance work in the face of the pandemic. A typical example is the region Kemerovo Oblast which has a well-developed system of career guidance with a regional coordination and a methodological centre. In this region, a survey of specialists organizing and directly performing career guidance work with students was conducted during the pandemic; the question was: “What career guidance activities do you perform online?” The answers were distributed as follows: online career guidance counseling: 54 percent; virtual excursions: 45 percent; online vocational tryouts and master classes: 40 percent; distance learning (lessons) on career guidance: 37 percent; online marathon, open day, quest, seminar, quiz, etc.: less than 15 percent for each item. Only about one percent of those surveyed completely ceased career guidance activities because of the pandemic. At the same time, respondents noted that while online career guidance counseling and classes can, in general, achieve their goals (and can continue in this format after the pandemic), conducting vocational tryouts and master classes online significantly reduces their effectiveness.

Similar results were found for the Samara region. According to a survey of teachers responsible for career guidance at educational institutions, 30 percent transferred their work to a remote format quickly and without loss of quality; 42 percent organized the remote process of career guidance with some loss of quality and educational effectiveness; 21 percent of respondents reported great difficulties in transferring work to a remote format; and 7 percent could not move to a remote format and ceased their career guidance work during the period of restrictions. Assessing the results of career guidance work during the pandemic, 59 percent of respondents said they were able to adapt previously used forms of work to the remote format. 64 percent noted that they have mastered new forms of work (online vocational tryouts, etc.). In contrast, 36 percent “lost some of the effective forms” (meaning primarily events for career guidance networking which are popular in the region and are associated with the work of communication platforms providing “live communication” in the “student – parent – employer” triad).

As the analysis of specific practices shows, “online” vocational tryouts actually refer to blended vocational tryouts (the name is based on an analogy with blended learning). Blended schemes of vocational tryouts for students were conducted during the pandemic, for example, in Moscow (“Professional Environment” project) and Kazan (“Online Professional Tryouts of the Talent University” project). They used a single model:

- ▶ During the first stage, online lectures and/or master classes on the given type of professional activity or competence are held
- ▶ During the second stage, students receive instructions and conduct a vocational tryout on their own (offline), according to a given algorithm and making a video recording
- ▶ During the third stage, an expert evaluates the completed vocational tryout on the basis of the video posted online and provides recommendations for constructing the further route of professional self-orientation during the webinar

One might have expected that the pandemic period would prompt the development of full-fledged online trials, e.g. using virtual reality tools, at least for some professions and specialties, but this did not happen (such vocational VR tryouts are still exotic exceptions in Russia and exist only in some corporate models of early career guidance, for example, in JSC Russian Railways. But even in this case, they were developed before the pandemic).

Full-fledged online vocational tryouts were only developed for IT professions and competences as part of the federal early career guidance project for students in grades 6–11: “A Ticket to the Future.” It included, for instance, performing programming or technical design tasks in specific online environments. Of the 103 professions and competences for which the “Ticket to the Future” vocational tryouts were developed, 19 included the option of online participation. The rest were conducted in person during the relaxation of anti-pandemic measures in the fall of 2020. In 2020, 166,000 students were enrolled in vocational tryouts as part of the “Ticket to the Future” project; this constituted 1.7 percent of students in grades 6–11.

Thus, the pandemic period had the following effects on changes in career guidance work with schoolchildren.

- ▶ Firstly, the availability of career guidance services has decreased slightly, but their quality has decreased markedly. As a consequence, the quality of professional self-orientation of first-year students who entered colleges and universities in 2020 has declined (along with a significant deterioration in their general education in a remote learning environment). Compared with previous years, the proportion of first-year students who chose a profession or subject under the influence of random circumstances and did not have a sufficient general education for mastering that profession or subject has increased markedly.
- ▶ Secondly, the pandemic period did not lead to the emergence of fundamentally new (digital) tools for organizing career guidance work. However, it has somewhat intensified the work that was already being carried out earlier in this direction (the development of tools and platforms for online career guidance diagnostics; online games for the early career guidance of students).

II. The impact of the pandemic on the situation of the Russian youth in the labour market

In general, the pandemic led to a significant increase in unemployment in the Russian population. While the unemployment rate for people aged 15 and older hovered between 4.3 and 4.8 percent (of the total labour force) in 2019, it reached a value of 6.4 percent in August-September 2020 (the highest one for many years) before beginning to decline slightly. At the same time, according to the Russian Ministry of Labor and Social Protection, the number of Russians receiving unemployment benefits in 2020 increased fivefold compared to the previous year.

However, the general problems of the labour market in Russia during the pandemic do not affect young people more than other groups. The share of young people (15–29 years old) among the unemployed in the Russian Federation was 34 percent at the beginning of 2021; this is even slightly less than the share of young people among the working age population of Russia as a whole (35 percent). The pandemic did not so much exacerbate the problem of youth unemployment as it brought to light its specific characteristics.

- ▶ As a result of forced remote learning, the quality of the practical training of graduates of Vocational Education organizations, which was not always sufficient in the best of times, has decreased. This negatively affects the ability of graduates to work at a formally set level of qualification and contributes to them being forced into the shadow labour market (according to the Higher School of Economics, 28 percent of graduates at the intermediate VET level are employed in the shadow economy).
- ▶ The labour market in the Russian Federation does not meet the demands of the younger generation for flexible forms of employment (telecommuting, freelancing, flexible schedule, “gig economy”, etc.), which was pointed out by Deputy Prime Minister Tatyana Golikova in her speech on 16 March 2021.
- ▶ Lastly, the period of remote learning showed that the vast majority of young people are not ready for productive self-study in the digital educational environment. Neither schools and colleges, nor universities prepare students for continuous effective online self-education (this is not provided for in any educational standard), despite such readiness becoming one of the leading requirements of modern employers, especially in the cutting-edge technology sectors. This is another challenge, a qualitatively new demand of the labour market to the education system: enable graduates to learn on their own in the digital educational environment and prepare them for continuous vocational online self-education. By not responding to this challenge, the education system aggravates the risks associated with a decrease in the competitiveness of young people in the labour market.