

Women and higher education in Russia: Preparation for careers in the apparel industry

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Since the advent of glasnost and perestroika at the end of the 1980s, the system of national education in Russia has undergone substantial reform (Eklof & Dneprov, 1993; Jones, 1994). Included among the outcomes of this reform is the drastic cut in state subsidies that defined education during Soviet times, resulting in what has been called “the commercialization of education” happening throughout Russia today (Kerr, 1995). According to UNESCO’s latest report on the Russian educational system, there are roughly 880 higher educational institutions located throughout the country (UNESCO, 2000). Davydov (2004) found that the number of students enrolled in these institutions has doubled in the period between 1990 to 2002, even though only 50% of these students received free education in 2002, in contrast to 100% in 1990. Baskakova (2004) indicates that during this time there was also a rapid increase in the number of women pursuing higher education that nearly doubled that of male students.

In light of the social, political, and economic upheavals experienced in Russia during the past decade, the purpose of this study was to explore the motivations, expectations, and perceptions held by female students enrolled in apparel programs. Because the literature describes both a state of decline and the potential for growth in regards to the apparel industry (Parshukova, 2003; Russian Apparel Industry Report, 2003) but does not address the link between this industry and higher education, there are several questions that surface which have yet to be addressed. Taking into account such industry dynamics coupled with an increase in women pursuing higher education, the experiences of women who enroll in these programs are examined alongside the ways by which they are ultimately being prepared to move into professional careers after graduation.

A qualitative approach to data collection and interpretation formed the methodological basis of this study. Multiple methods were used to collect the data, including in-depth interviews and a demographic questionnaire (Kvale, 1996; McCracken, 1988). All data was collected at two universities: the St. Petersburg State University of Technology and Design and the St. Petersburg State Academy of Service and Economy. Both are leading Russian universities that offer long-standing programs for students interested in careers in the apparel industry. A total of twenty-five women from the two universities participated in the data collection. Interviews were conducted in Russian and lasted approximately one hour. All participants completed a brief questionnaire used to collect basic demographic information. Interview and questionnaire data was translated into English by one of the authors, a native Russian speaker. For reliability purposes a second native Russian speaker was then asked to review the translations.

A phenomenological interpretation (van Manen, 1990) of the responses led to the development of three overarching conceptual areas connecting similar perspectives that surfaced across the student narratives, including: *motivations for pursuing an apparel degree*, *goals for the future*, and *thoughts on the Russian industry*. Within each of these areas, several themes emerged which elucidate commonalities and differences in participant experiences. Key issues that frame the interpretation point to a degree of ambiguity on the part of participants stemming from the radical changes experienced by Russians during the late 20th and early 21st century. For example, the plethora of western consumer goods which flooded the Russian marketplace in the early 1990s, most notably apparel, was cited by most participants to be a driving force in their decisions to pursue a degree in apparel merchandising or design. Yet in contrast, anxiety regarding the viability of the apparel industry as it transitions from being comprised of mostly large, state run operations to small, privately owned businesses was also a strong component within all of the narratives. It is clear, however, that the participants see themselves as having the potential to make a difference with their apparel degrees. Citing the growing need for cutting edge design by Russian companies, whether large or small, all of the participants felt that they could and would become a part of this re-emerging industry and ultimately, help to shape contemporary Russian fashion.

The results of this investigation establish the significance of apparel programs for facilitating women's career aspirations and have implications for understanding the educational and employment goals of women from an international perspective. Further research is needed in order to determine the roles these young Russian women will take on within the industry upon completion of their degrees. Given the fact that the apparel industry in Russia is not immune to the significant economic shifts happening in Russia today, and that the industry is inherently global in nature, further investigation of the opportunities available to Russian women will ultimately have international implications for understanding the key issues impacting the advancement of women within this profession.

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