

PRECARISATION OF LABOUR AS A GROWING FORM OF EMPLOYMENT OF YOUNG SPECIALISTS IN THE CONTEXT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

The Covid-19 pandemic has catalysed the inevitable digitalisation of communications and rapidly changed the organisation and technologies of professional activities of millions of employees worldwide. The growth of unemployment, the transition of professional groups to remote work (wherever possible) due to the need for isolation to minimise the spread of COVID-19 in 2020 led to radical changes in the labour market. Studying the processes of precarisation can facilitate the search for responses to new challenges related to deregulation of labour relations. We are interested in examining the participation of youth in these processes. Young population is receptive to social innovation and has excellent competencies in the field of information technology. An analysis of professional trajectories of university graduates (employed in the Ural region and beyond) helps identify whether precarious employment in the labour market can be successful, and determine the characteristics of social groups involved. We used the monitoring of university graduates conducted in 2017–2019 based on survey and administrative data. To process the data, we applied the methods of classification and expert evaluations. The analysis showed that 34.4 % of university graduates belong to the precariat, with only 8.8 % being unemployed. Young freelancers and IT-professionals are successfully employed, satisfied with their jobs and high salaries, demonstrating high rates of employment in their specialty. The results can be applied for balancing precarious work; its best practices, accumulated by freelancers and IT-professionals, can be used as a social tool for regulating labour relations in an unfavourable epidemiological situation.

Keywords: precarisation, precariat, freelancers, underemployment, IT professionals, foreign students, precarious employment during the Covid-19 pandemic, labour market, employment, university graduates, young professionals, professional trajectories, financial success, higher education

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Introduction

The uncertainty of the labour market conditions, unemployment among the working-age population along with formal employment gave rise to precarious forms of employment. Until 2020, economists, sociologists, and labour market researchers considered these forms of labour relations as unreliable, unstable, limiting opportunities for personal self-realization, and negatively affecting the social well-being of social groups.

The unpredictable outbreak of coronavirus infection became the key challenge in March-April 2020 that hindered the production development and provision of services that require direct interaction between the parties, and reduced opportunities for selling manufactured products. One of the acute social problems is the need to regulate socio-economic interactions and regional labour markets.

In a short time, millions of company employees became part of the precariat. Self-isolation led to a sharp increase in unemployment, a reduction in employees' salaries, and a change in the organisation of work practices. The other side of the pandemic is the individual's motivation for action due to a limited, static social life¹. A synchronous return to the pre-pandemic situation is impossible and various forms of remote interaction will be extremely demanded.

The precariat representatives act as agents in the context of instability and insecurity in the labour market and social life. In times of the pandemic, a paradoxical situation develops: the vulnerable precariat appears to be more protected than those with only formal employment experience. Identifying

¹ How to Maintain Motivation in a Pandemic. The New York Times. Retrieved from: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/18/well/mind/motivation-pandemic-coronavirus.html> (Date of access: 22.05.20).

the professional characteristics of the precariat, sharing their positive experience of adapting to uncertainty can help reduce social tension among groups with a high risk of precarisation.

Literature review

From a historical perspective, the precariat emerged in the period of 1975–2008, when the global market economy based on competitiveness and individualism was forming and developing [1, p. 2]. The key characteristic of institutional changes in the labour market was the practice of flexible labour relations.

According to the British economist Guy Standing, in the conditions of the world economic market of the 21st century the precariat (from “unreliable” and “proletariat”) has a vulnerable position in society. The precariat is a socio-economic group with no job security who only have the right to get paid for current work, no social guarantees, including unemployment benefits [1, pp. 7–12], or medical insurance.

In 1998, the French sociologist P. Bourdieu coined the term “flexploitation” that means “rational management of lack of security, which, through coordinated manipulation of production, creates competition between workers in countries with the greatest social benefits” [2, p. 85]. Political factors and socio-economic consequences of the emergence of the precariat become dominant: by managing labour resources, employers are able to reduce production costs. Insecurity and flexibility of labour relations concern young professionals. At the start of their careers, they are forced to shape their professional trajectories without any professional experience and compensate for this by reducing their requirements for future work: temporary employment, low wages, and modest social benefits.

The precariat increases an employee’s financial independence from a particular employer, but, in global terms, enhances discipline among the workforce [3]. The role of globalisation in the growth of the precariat around the world is widely recognised. The authors [4] state that this is a new trend in the West, but an old reality for the rest of the world (in China, informal work is not a new phenomenon, but the norm since the early industrialisation of China in 1898–1949).

The widespread informal employment and reduction in the employees’ collective capacity will complicate the protection of employees’ rights in labour disputes with employers [5]. Foreign researchers in their studies focus on protecting the rights of those in precarious employment. It is necessary to combine the concepts of informal and non-standard employment and develop social protection mechanisms regardless of the form of employment [6]. Researchers [7, 8] note that precarisation leads to the emergence of new forms of employees’ self-organisation, which entails social and economic consequences.

Sociologists and economists pay considerable attention to the specificity of the precariat in various fields of activity. It became widespread in higher education. The reasons for this situation, as exemplified by Ireland [9], include budget cuts, transfer of research funding to external agencies, a reduction in permanent contracts and increased use of part-time employment schemes and temporary staff for teaching and research work. The neoliberalisation of universities has dramatically changed the institutional employment. Permanent jobs are cut in favour of temporary work. Based on the analysis of academic work practice in Irish higher education, we conclude that precarisation has become systemic, and not just the prerogative of researchers without an academic degree (PhD) or with little research experience. In our opinion, this is a consequence of cutting public spending on higher education and research.

There is a growing tendency of the precariat expanding in schools [10]: by 2022, over half a million teachers, mainly from the USA and UK, will be employed using this scheme in international secondary English-speaking schools in non-English-speaking countries. Alternatively, the role of education in managing the social risk created by the precariat is also discussed [11].

The specific features of young white collar professionals’ work is considered in [12] based on the example of Italy. Employees are often portrayed as independent professionals, although they increasingly face conditions similar to those of permanent employees and are more affected by crises due to increased precarisation in the absence of trade union support or political representation.

The “Uberisation” of the economy is viewed by researchers as one of the most significant factors that contribute to the growth of the precariat. The study of Uber drivers’ work organisation is worth considering [13]. Almost all spheres of professional activity are subject to precarisation: researchers who study mobility note professional sports, in particular [14].

Russian researchers extensively study the process of precarisation: they are looking into the reasons for the growth of a new social class [15]. The study [16] examines the instability of the labour market in the public sector, which is the reason for precarisation for socially oriented professions in Russian metropolises.

Using the cluster and factor analysis and building a model of likelihood to become part of the precariat (logit model), the authors of [17] concluded that up to 27 % of working Russians can be considered as part of this category. Researchers note “the expansion of forced social and economic employment relations” [18, p. 672]. Work is no longer a source of medium- and long-term planning.

When studying the content characteristics of the precariat, researchers in the field of education economics argue that for those self-employed in the sphere of science and technology, there are “large fines”, that is, lower wages due to their degree not matching their work; this fact does not reduce their level of job satisfaction. Additionally, “the reasons for mismatch among the self-employed differ dramatically by gender” [19, p. 85]. In-depth studies of job satisfaction among the precariat can change the perception of this class.

Expanding the research of precariat through the determination theory gives an advantage: “when implementing employment strategies, university graduates are guided by value orientations they developed while studying that determine the choice of job that will ensure the application of existing knowledge, skills, the desired income, professional and career growth” [20, pp. 123–124].

We consider that people belonging to the precariat are those engaged in dependent labour (employees, including IT professionals as a social group with a number of specific characteristics of professional trajectories), part-time employees, and the self-employed.

The study examines university graduates who graduated six months ago as the precariat: they are a mobile social group whose need to implement professional trajectories is determined by their internal need to identify and confirm individual inclinations for the profession, and by the external social need for qualified personnel who are self-organised and able to solve problems in the context of uncertainty and flexibility of social and labour activities.

Among the types of precarious employment identified by economists and sociologists [18, 21, pp. 62–66], we consider those that are relevant for the labour relations between employers and university graduates.

1. Freelancers as representatives of “creative professions”.
2. Those employed in the field of IT, i.e. IT professionals, programmers, etc.
3. Those with part-time employment, irregular work: a form of employment that hides the real unemployment rate; people work more, but receive lower remuneration for their work.
4. Those involved in professional activities as outsourced employees.
5. Migrants: in our study they are represented by foreign students employed in the Russian labour market (it is easier for them to integrate into the labour market; the university education is the platform for soft integration into the country’s culture).
6. The unemployed as the precariat. It would not be correct to interpret the indicators of the unemployed without excluding those continuing their studies for a master’s degree in other universities, those in postgraduate or further education courses. Investment in human potential brings greater returns in the long term than rapid integration into the labour market.
7. Mixed type that includes the characteristics of the first five types.

The first two groups “represent a social group of the so-called creative professions that is difficult to account for. They are often presented as freedom-loving spirits, independent of the strict and petty regulation in official enterprises and organisations” [21, p. 65].

The difference between those employed in the IT field and freelancers is that the former can have very stable labour relations. It is the very nature of their work (for example, the development of information systems) that implies flexibility, expressed in minimal restrictions (regarding the location they work at and the time, except for the control points for the project). The IT sphere often uses the approaches borrowed from project management: employees do their work as part of company projects. In sociological literature “IT professionals are considered as the most stable segment of the creative class in terms of job security” [22, p. 84] due to the shortage of this type of personnel in the labour market. They change their jobs easily: their work is satisfying, but they strive to balance between companies, projects and professional positions, and do not need long-term employment contracts. Those who have stable labour relations are close to freelancers in terms of the content of their work

and the attitude towards it, and, as a result, close to the precariat. This opinion is shared by researchers from Lomonosov Moscow State University [23].

The implementation of professional trajectories by university graduates (their employment) is a basic characteristic of the social structure of modern society. Therefore, the study of transformations in types of employment can contribute to a deeper understanding of the processes of precarisation in the labour market.

Research methods and data used

Universities can contribute to maintaining the region's sustainable economic development by consulting on the regulation of the regional labour market using data on young professionals' employment in the context of the pandemic. It can be implemented by universities that have developed the tools for interacting with alumni and systemic practices for feedback from them. If universities use institutional research to achieve strategic goals, they build a policy based on data confirming their market advantage among the leading national universities dealing with the era of COVID-19.²

One of the responses to the changed labour environment and the social problem of labour market instability is an in-depth study of the qualitative and quantitative characteristics of the employment of young professionals that belonged to the precariat even before the pandemic. The conclusions are based on the results of institutional research of graduates in 2017–2019, six months after they graduated from the university, held in the Ural Federal University (UrFU).

The data were obtained using an online survey; then, the results were compared with administrative data. Three phases of monitoring were carried out in the format of an annual survey. An average of 34 % of each year's pool of graduates were interviewed (3872 graduates, excluding those who continued their studies in UrFU obtaining a master's degree). The study is based on the best practices of organising surveys to get feedback from students and graduates abroad (in the USA³, Australia⁴, China⁵) and in Russia [24].

The survey involved collecting data from an online questionnaire with individual links sent to the participants. The principles for ensuring the data reliability and validity are as follows: (1) response to the survey of at least 30 %, (2) response for at least 80 % of degree fields from the general population; (3) response for each degree field of at least 20 %.

The main characteristics of the respondents are the students' level of education (the share of the surveyed bachelor's degree and specialist's degree students is 59 %, the share of master's degree students is 41 %) and the mode of study (full-time). 62 % of the sample are women, and 38 % are men. The average age of the interviewed bachelor's degree students is 22; for master's degree students it is 25.

The key scenarios of the survey toolkit measure the graduates' employment (types, forms and geography of employment, position, place of work, department, specialisation, etc.), their salary, educational experience at the university, educational trajectories after graduation, interest in obtaining additional education.

The regional context of the study is that university graduates are in demand and find employment not only in Sverdlovsk oblast (where the university is located), but also in other regions of the Ural Federal District (Chelyabinsk, Kurgan, Tyumen oblasts, including Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Okrug and Yamalo-Nenets Autonomous Okrug). UrFU is the largest university that trains young personnel primarily for the region (87 % of graduates). Given the small number of precariat groups in the sample, it is not possible to identify the differences in the university graduates' professional trajectories by the criterion of the geography of employment; this can become an extremely valuable and significant subject of analysis for other studies.

² Douglass A.D., Chirikov I. Refocusing institutional research on university needs. Retrieved from: https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20200518114757175&fbclid=IwAR0uumexYDGdBq1M_ICqum5NT0NsJS7th1TECy34bxS7tOlpPjyXqkflyJ8 (Date of access: 24.05.20).

³ Student Experience in the Research University (SERU) Consortium. Retrieved from: <https://cshe.berkeley.edu/seru> (Date of access: 24.05.20).

⁴ Australian Graduate Survey (AGS). Retrieved from: <http://www.graduatecareers.com.au/research/surveys/australiangraduatesurvey/> (Date of access: 24.05.20).

⁵ Employment rate of Chinese college graduates remains stable: report. Retrieved from: <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201906/16/WS5d0648e3a3103dbf1432875c.html> (Date of access: 24.05.20).

The analysis of these data will clarify a number of important research questions and practical issues. (1) What are the opportunities for regulating the regional labour market during the pandemic? (2) What are the characteristics of university graduates' professional trajectories, what positive personal experience they have as the precariat? (3) What is the proportion of employed university graduates belonging to the precariat who can share the positive experience to reduce social tension in society? The real and potential precarisation of graduates' employment during the pandemic was assessed. The results have scientific value as they determine changes in the social structure of modern society, taking into account the nonlinearity of social processes, and assess the young professionals' economic motivations in the labour market from the perspective of behavioural economics.

Research results

The study identified the structure of the precariat at the beginning of university graduates' professional trajectories. The composition of the precariat is as follows: 2.6 % are freelancers, 18.9 % are employed part-time, 20.1 % work in the sphere of IT, 0.5 % are outsourced, 1.4 % are foreign students employed in Russia, 2.5 % are of mixed type (have several characteristics of the groups above), 8.8 % are unemployed, and 7.3 % do not have a job, but are continuing their education in one form or another. The percentage of those who are continuing their education among those employed part-time is equally high (47 %). The professional trajectories of these two groups should be viewed as prospectively successful, as they realise that in the modern world continuous learning is required.

Russian studies of the precariat often focus on the structural parameters of the class [21], while the qualitative characteristics are not sufficiently studied. Let us consider how the young professionals' trajectories are developing (Table 1).

The key quantitative parameter shows that the average wages among the precariat are higher than among graduates in conventional employment sectors. The level of satisfaction with the content of work and working conditions is higher among freelancers and IT professionals than in other groups. Those who are employed part-time have substantial earnings and can increase them in case of financial need. At the start of their careers, the precariat's financial trajectories can be called successful. An important feature of labour precarisation is the lack of ambition regarding career trajectory development: the proportion of those employed in managerial positions is low, while job satisfaction is high.

A significant proportion of the precariat found work in their degree field. This indicator for the university is higher than the average percentage of "employment that corresponds to the degree field among Russian university graduates, which has been 45–50 %" [25, p. 38]. Both engineers and those with a degree in humanities and economics became freelancers; therefore, freelancing is an area where one can apply various skills. In addition to those who studied information technologies at the university, people specialising in engineering and humanities (12 % in each sphere) took an interest in the IT sphere. This group includes graduates who became disillusioned with their profession, but were able to find a new sphere of self-fulfilment due to high-quality basic university education.

The professional trajectories of some representatives of the precariat (freelancers and IT professionals) show that it is possible to gain positive personal experience. Work results and job satisfaction when working remotely largely depend on the ability to plan one's working day, to work independently, to solve problems, to complete work-related tasks, as well as on the willingness to take responsibility for their own performance. These personality traits are in demand by employers in the modern world [26, p. 14]. The importance of social skills and personal qualities was measured indirectly through assessing the demand for further education. The demand for courses focused on personal growth and self-organisation is slightly higher among the working precariat than among other graduates (7.6 % and 6.7 %, respectively). Similar differences can be seen in the demand for courses in psychology (8.3 % and 6.3 %), which also indicates the need for developing certain personal qualities, the ability to build effective communications with people, as well as for IT-related courses (9.0 % and 5.6 %). The precariat understands the real value of continuous improvement of personal qualities and social skills.

Let us assess the structure of university graduates' employment and the risk of becoming part of the precariat, considering the crisis in industries due to Covid-19 (Table 2).

The risk of becoming part of the precariat for employees in a number of economic sectors was assessed, taking into account the Ural Federal District governors' decrees that banned the activities in

Table 1

Features of professional trajectories and socio-demographic parameters of university graduates

Parameter reflecting the value in each analysed group	Freelancing,	IT	Part-time employment	Foreign students	Employed, not part of precariat	out of employment due to continuing education	unemployed
Characteristics of professional trajectories							
Average salary, thousand roubles	42654	47309	27288	32199	36647	—	—
Share of graduates holding managerial positions, %	0	2	6	0	6	—	—
Graduates with subordinates, %	0	12	11	8	17	—	—
The job's compliance with the degree field (personal assessment by the graduates), %	62	76	64	60	72	—	—
Evaluation of satisfaction with some work parameters							
Share of graduates satisfied with work content, %*	94	86	73	79	76	—	—
Share of graduates satisfied with working conditions, %*	82	92	80	81	80	—	—
Share of graduates satisfied with their position, %*	82	85	69	69	74	—	—
Socio-demographic characteristics and educational trajectories							
Share of men, %	31	50	33	46	37	37	40
Share of graduates with master's degrees, %	31	51	47	50	44	24	30
Graduates with degrees in engineering and technology, % by column	34	12	21	28	39	23	26
Graduates with degrees in natural sciences, % by column	9	4	16	20	11	17	12
Graduates with degrees in humanities, % by column	34	12	40	30	23	35	32
Graduates with degrees in economics and management, % by column	20	8	16	4	19	17	23
Graduates with degrees in mathematics and IT, % by column	3	63	7	19	8	8	7
Share of graduates with high average grades, %	89	83	87	72	83	91	69

* Satisfaction with certain parameters is calculated based on the sum of extreme positive points (4 and 5), taking into account the experience of data analysis in similar foreign studies.

Table 2

Features of professional trajectories of university graduates and the share of employed by economic sectors with varying degrees of risk of being included in the precariat, considering the consequences of COVID-19 (% by column)

Types of groups with different degree of precarisation	2017	2018	2019	Average
Precariat				
Employed	18,2	18,1	18,8	18,4
Unemployed due to studying	7,7	7,3	6,8	7,3
Unemployed	8,6	9,4	8,3	8,8
The employed and their risk of precarisation due to Covid-19				
low risk	29,7	30,2	32,5	30,8
high risk	16,7	17,9	15,9	16,8
high risk of unemployment	10,2	8,4	9,0	9,2
risks cannot be identified*	8,9	8,7	8,7	8,8

* The respondents are formally employed, but did not give the answer about their professional sphere.

certain professional spheres, and the general situation in Russia (for example, in the tourism sector). We used the method of expert evaluations by the research group.

First, when establishing groups with different risks of precarisation, we proceeded from the following hypothesis: the basic manufacturing industries will continue operating without significant changes, despite the quarantine measures. The economic development of the Ural region is due to increasing the competitiveness of the industrial cluster; many industries are highly likely to continue functioning as strategically important for the region (they will be the first to be relieved of “quarantine restrictions”). These include a wide range of industries: power engineering, energy and natural resources, telecommunications and other communications, construction and real estate, public service, transport (mostly cargo transportation) and logistics (included due to the impossibility of separating it from transport services at the level of databases), medicine and pharmaceuticals, emergency response services, housing and communal services, legal services (for example, protecting the interests of parties in court), automobile business, repair and maintenance services, journalism (for example, filming reports, creating photo banks), maintaining communications in the field of international relations. 30.8 % of graduates have permanent employment, and the risks of their work precarisation are low.

Second, the shift of the modern economy towards the provision of services destabilizes the labour market during the pandemic. These services include tourism and hotel business, air transportation, culture, leisure, art, organisation of public events, retail, restaurant business, fitness centres, cosmetology, advertising, printing trade. It was found that 9.2 % of professionals have high risks of unemployment because of the changed principles of interaction between subjects and organisation of public spaces.

Third, there are activities that, due to the content of work, could be implemented remotely. Taking into account the digitalisation of technologies and the pace of their development, these activities include banking, investments, finance, marketing, PR, advertising, retail trade through online stores, education and science, research, fashion, design. Professionals in these spheres have high risks of labour precarisation; they are deprived of action navigation, external regulators of motivation, they have to work in the conditions of blurred boundaries between working and free time. The share of this kind of young professionals in the sample is 16.8 %. Those who can take advantage of the precariat experience will be able to reduce the risks of unemployment in the future.

The analysis of professional trajectories allowed us to conclude that the level of higher education (the total of unemployed is 30 % of master’s graduates and 70 % of bachelor’s degree holders) and employment compliance with the university degree helps minimise the risks of unemployment even in the conditions of social instability. Simultaneously, structural changes that occur during the pandemic change the nature of labour relations and the approaches to the implementation of professional activity, the results of which depend on the political and economic factors, and on the young professionals’ social skills and qualities that help build personal navigation system for actions and trajectories.

Conclusion

The research agenda in the context of the pandemic included the issue of the possible consequences of Covid-19 for higher education and the labour market, for university graduates in particular, considering the social inequality, increasing differentiation among social groups, and destabilizing labour relations. Economists, sociologists, epidemiologists have yet to find evidence-based solutions to the challenges that higher education and the labour market are facing at the global, regional and national levels.

The study focuses on the issues of labour precarisation and its characteristic features, on the individual’s implementation of professional trajectories: adapting to uncertainty (to the new reality), working in the conditions of instability, high risks of becoming unemployed, developed skills of self-organisation, the ability to work independently and solve problems. All these tools describe the positive experience of meeting the social need to quickly adapt to the changed world and reduce the risks of labour precarisation. A positive finding in the analysis of the risks of labour precarisation is the fact that about 65 % of university graduates are “protected” from the consequences of the pandemic (they are employed in industries and professional areas related to the life support of the population (30.8 %)).

To prevent the negative effects of Covid-19 on the labour market and an increase in the unemployment rate from 8.8 % in the pre-pandemic period to 34.8 % (considering unemployed, the

areas with a high risk of unemployment and labour precarisation), it is worth sharing the precariat's successful employment experience with those who have experienced changes in the organisation of labour relations.

The period of society transformation during and after the pandemic highlights not only the vulnerability of labour market sectors (entrepreneurship, services), but also the changes in the work of employees in organisations (personal experience of working outside the office, "immunity" to flexible labour relations, finding new ways to develop successful financial trajectories). The issues of labour precarisation among young professionals are studied for increasing the role of institutional research in Russian universities in order to promptly adjust the universities' strategies in the period of recovery from the pandemic consequences and forecast, based on these data, unemployment problems in regional labour markets.

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