

PROFESSIONALISM OF HIGHER EDUCATION AND MECHANISMS FOR STRONGER TIES WITH LABOUR MARKET (WITH BSU AS EXAMPLE)

An insufficient professionalism of higher education and low qualification of graduates, along with the growth of the population of young people with university diplomas, are the key problems in Belarus and a number of neighbouring countries.

Professionalism is understood here as saturation of educational programmes (curricula) with professional disciplines and specialized subjects (basic disciplines, special courses, additional disciplines, etc.) in such a manner that a student could apply the obtained knowledge in his or her future practical area – professional or research activities.

The competitiveness of graduates of Belarusian higher schools and universities is highly dependent, even if we talk about such spheres like information technologies, on the competence obtained outside their alma mater through additional training (including corporate courses) and self-education. A number of "conservative" (fundamental) specialities at the Belarusian State University (BSU), which are completely within the classical concept of a university, namely, history, philology and philosophy, pose a complex challenge in front of their graduates of becoming professionals and being demanded at the labour market. Quite often they have to receive a new qualification or take additional training to obtain professional skills. The classic university specialities that offer no alternative in specialization to potential consumers of their services are becoming less attractive.

In July 2011, the 2011-2015 Programme of Higher Education Development in the Republic of Belarus was adopted; it pays attention to practical application of higher education and offers such measures like a broader recruitment to technical and engineering specialities (which is quite understandable in view of the current deficit of engineers), an increase of the range of special courses and disciplines taught by practical specialists, etc. However, the document leaves out of account such an important issue like scientific specialization, where the scope of disciplines is insufficient, in particular because of the universities' inability to independently regulate their curriculum content, and a great burden of mandatory disciplines, poorly associated with the profile of this or that educational programme.

The BSU tries to make use of a number of mechanisms aimed at improving professionalism, namely:

- Special courses and special seminars
- Practical training of students
- Execution of course and diploma projects under the guidance of the teachers of the graduation division
- Distribution of graduates (mandatory for those trained for budget money)
- Additional training courses and refreshment training at other departments of the BSU
- Training courses taken on the basis of university laboratories and educational and training centres

One of the large-scale innovations of the BSU was the Policy in Quality Management (approved in March 2010), which has fixed a scope of measures aimed to monitor the labour market, listed a number of external and internal factors that affect the quality of education, and established a

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feedback with students (consumers of services) and teachers. A regular polling of teachers and students with subsequent analysis of obtained data is one of the mechanisms practised by the BSU with the aim to boost the quality of educational services.

However, in spite of the fact that the feedback mechanism is present in the Policy, there is no real procedure for students' participation in academic planning and affecting the content of training courses. Moreover, the departments and the university as a whole lack enough freedom in simulating the curricula and address the issues of content, with a greater focus on professionalism.

A systemic barrier for broader professionalism at the BSU is a complexity of the procedure of amending the curricula, since a typical training plan in some speciality needs approval, apart from the Teaching-Methodology Council, by the respective ministry. Besides, no university components and no mandatory social and humanitarian disciplines cannot be excluded from the curriculum, although they take quite a lot of training hours compared with the profile, special and specialized courses.

In general, the university needs an individual policy applied to the fundamental departments, theoretical specialities, as well as to the departments that are clearer associated with the labour market. Besides, it is important to thoroughly examine the best practices applied by different departments and try to make use of them within the existing institutional environment.