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RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE PERFORMANCES OF PROFESSIONAL AGRICULTURAL EDUCATION AND RURAL LABOUR MARKET IN THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA

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Abstract

The main objective of this paper was to elucidate the relationship between the performance indicator of professional agricultural education „the number of graduates" and rural labour market in the Republic of Moldova. Caring out an analysis of the statistical data regarding the number of graduates and the state of the labour market as well as making a synthesis of some studies focused on the rural labour market problems in the Republic of Moldova, the authors identified a series of problems related to the difficulties existing in the quantification of the impact of the professional agricultural education performance on the rural labour market, as well as its optimization. Consequently, some recommendations have been formulated in order to harmonize the relationship between professional education and labour market.

Key words**:** *agricultural education* **,** *labour market, rural environment, sustainable development*

INTRODUCTION

Under current circumstances, when the labour market of the Republic of Moldova is deeply affected by the demographic aging and massive population decline, increased labour force participation rate along with increased level of labour processes technologization and implicitly of the labour productivity, are considered as factors that could make an essential contribution to mitigating the created situation [1]. At present, professional education institutions of all levels are among the active players in the labour market, being, by their very nature, skilled labour force producers. Therefore, among the indicators rating the performance of a professional education institution, we identified the number of graduates as an indicator that should later be found in the qualified population employed - this already being a basic indicator of the labour market. In the same context, it is important to mention that, along with the quantitative recording of the professional education outputs, the quality of these outputs is also significant, as it is usually expressed in terms of competences held by the graduates and their contribution to the performance of the sector/enterprise and organizations where they work after graduation.

Referring to the professional agricultural education, it is obvious that the main beneficiary of professional education is the rural environment, agriculture being the basic branch where the „finished product" arrives (or should arrive). However, the real situation is a precarious one, with a whole series of problems related to the transition from professional education to the labour market.

The importance of the issue of youth relations with the labour market in the context of concern for sustainable development is recognized globally. As confirmation, among the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) of the renowned Agenda 2030, we'd like to underline the content of Goal 8: „Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all" [10]. Among the target objectives of the SDG 8, we highlight those having a direct reference to the issue of young people's relationship with the labour market:

Target 8.5 By 2030, to achieve full and productive employment, decent work and

equal pay for all women and men, including the young and disabled persons.
Target 8.6 By 2030, substantially reduce the proportion of youth that are not employed or involved in education or training.
Target 8.b By 2030, develop and implement a global strategy focused on youth employment, and put into practice the provisions of the Global Jobs Pact of the International Labour Organization.
Thus, if SDG 4 of Agenda 2030 „Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all" is focused on the quality of education, we could assert that one of the key roles of the SDG 8 is to ensure the transfer of education products to the labour market.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

In order to carry out the investigation, the following research methods and tools were used: the synthesis of some studies on the labour market in the Republic of Moldova in the context of concern for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals 4 and 8; the analysis of situation of the existing professional education both through the evolution of some quantitative indicators and problems related to the quality of training those specialists who meet the demands of the business environment; and formulating conclusions and judgments on possible interventions to solve the identified problems.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

By adapting the Agenda 2030 and nationalizing the SDG in the Republic of Moldova [6], the criteria according to which the actions should to be taken in the context of the concern for sustainable development were identified. Referring to SDG 8 we note that this, together with the priorities of the National Development Strategy „Moldova 2020" and the provisions of the Association Agreement between the Republic of Moldova and the European Union, was taken into account as a reference point for the development and approval of the National Employment Strategy for the period 2017-2021 [9]. In the context of the overall strategic goal of increasing formal employment based on economic competitiveness, adequate skills and qualifications, within the established priorities, we identified a number of specific objectives directly targeting young people, referring to: stimulating job creation; increasing the attractiveness, relevance and inclusion of the professional education system, strengthening the institutional capacity of actors responsible for developing, implementing and monitoring employment policy, and promoting decent employment opportunities through active labour market policies, as well as ensuring the rights and obligations of employees and employers with regard to non-standard forms of employment, etc.
Also, among the major targets of the National Employment Strategy for the period 2017-2021, we identified the direct approach of the young population in the provision on reducing the proportion of youth not in employment, education or training from 29.3% in 2015 to 26.8% in 2021 [9]. At the same time, we can't ignore the fact that the other targets of this strategy aimed at increasing the employment rate, including formal employment, reducing the unemployment rate, salary disparity, and so on also includes in its coverage the young population.
The increased attention paid to young people is a natural and justified one, as it involves a whole series of negative phenomena manifested in the quantitative and qualitative evolution of the qualified youth segment on the labour market. The surveys show that in the Republic of Moldova youth employment indicators are lower compared to the total active economic population [1]. Thus, it is estimated that only one third of Moldovan youth work, while at the EU level about 46% of youth is employed [5].
The first symptom indicating the problem is the tendency of reduced employment of qualified young people (as namely the age category of 15-24 years includes the majority of graduates of professional education institutions). Implicitly, by examining activity and employment rates over the period 2010-2017, we could state that they were

continuously reduced during the examined period (Table 1).

Table 1. Differences in the activity and employment rate of the young qualified population in the Republic of Moldova in the period 2010-2017, %

Indicators	**2010**	**2017**	**Deviations (+,-)**
Activity rate according to the level of training:			
Higher education	61.2	54.0	-7.2
Post-secondary technical vocational education institutions (centers of excellence and colleges)	46.9	32.5	-14.4
Secondary technical vocational schools (professional schools)	46.9	43.7	-3.2
Employment rate according to the level of training:			
Higher education	48.0	47.1	-0.9
Post-secondary technical vocational education	37.1	27.0	-10.1
Secondary technical vocational education	39.4	38.7	-0.7

Source: Own elaboration based on [11]

Even if the unemployment rate is declining among the population segments surveyed, this tendency can't be considered relevant, given the lack of accurate data on the real number of unemployed people.

The precarious situation of youth insertion on the labour market is also confirmed by the very low share of the number of qualified population in the total number of qualified population, as well as the decreasing tendency of the indicator (Table 2).

Table 2. Changes of the share of employed young qualified population in the total employed qualified population in the Republic of Moldova in the period 2012-2017, %

Indicators	2012			2017			Deviations (+,-)		
	total	urban	rural	total	urban	rural	total	urban	rural
The share of employed young people who graduated from higher education institutions in the total employed population with the same level of education	7.50	7.25	8.41	5.17	4.88	6.11	-2.33	-2.37	-2.3
The share of employed young people who graduated from post-secondary technical vocational education institutions in the total employed population with the same level of education	5.88	5.84	5.80	5.57	5.60	5.53	-0.31	-0.24	-0.27
The share of employed young people who graduated from secondary technical vocational schools in the total employed population with the same level of education	8.26	7.11	9.04	7.03	6.95	7.07	-1.23	-0.16	-1.97

Source: Own elaboration based on [11]

In order to emphasize the impact of professional agricultural education performance on the rural labour market, we will first of all highlight the difficulty of operating this activity itself. Thus, the data on the graduates' employment rate has a large margin of error because of the lack of effective mechanisms developed at national level that would allow for more accurate evidence. Despite the fact that the existing quality management systems of educational institutions are in charge of keeping track of the employment status of their graduates as well as their career path, the existing databases are incomplete and can't provide an accurate overview of the situation. As a result, certain trends on graduates' employment can only be identified by correlating the data on

graduation rate and the evolution of the youth segment (aged up to 24), who completed study programmes in the relevant branches. In this context, we will initially present the evolution of the number of Bachelor's and Master's degree graduates in the field of „Agricultural Sciences" and those who graduated from the Integrated Studies Programme „Veterinary Medicine" in the period 2019-2017 (Figure 1).

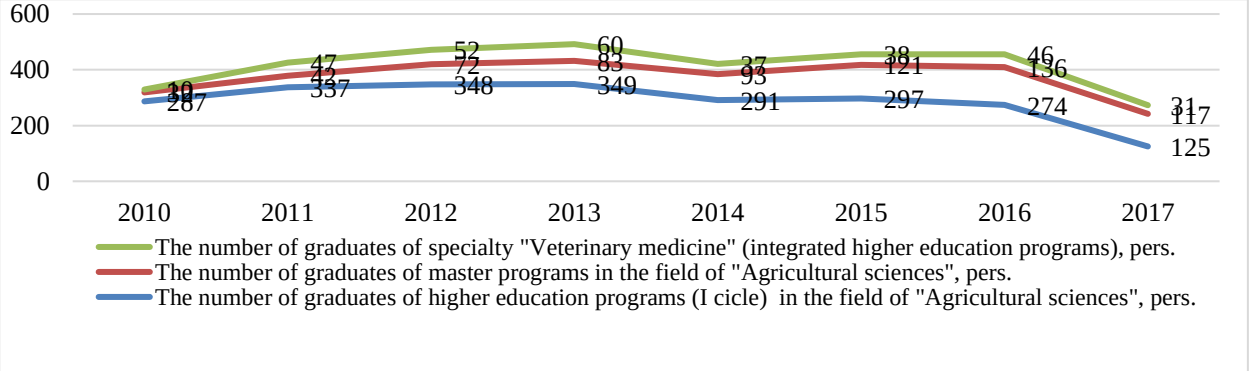

Figure 1. Evolution of the number of Bachelor's and Master' degree graduates in the field of „Agricultural Sciences" and graduates of the integrated degree programme in „Veterinary medicine" in the Republic of Moldova in the period 2019-2017
Source: Own elaboration based on [11]

According to data presented in Figure 1 we deduce a decrease in the number of graduates in the analyzed period. However, cumulatively, 263 specialists were provided to the national economy in the year 2017. Therefore, it is quite difficult to make accurate estimates classifying it as either good or bad. It is known that a part of Bachelor's degree graduates continue their master degree studies. Another part finds a job either in other branches, emigrates abroad or simply become unemployed. The rural areas are mostly affected by the consequences of such a situation. Thus, according to some studies conducted in 2015, it was found that while the average employment rate of young people with higher education was about 53%, in the rural area this index constituted only 43%. At the same time, it was determined that in the rural area out of 10 unemployed people, 7 were young [1].

The assertion that a large number of graduates with higher education in the field of agricultural sciences and veterinary medicine are not employed in the agricultural enterprises is also confirmed by the low share of young specialists with higher education in the total number of population employed in that sector and also the lack of visible qualitative changes in the period 2010-2017 (Table 3).

Table 3. Differences in the share of qualified youth in the total population employed in the rural agricultural sector of the Republic of Moldova in the period 2010-2017

Indicators	2010	2017	Deviations (+,-)
Total employed population, thousand people	295.8	368.2	72.4
Including the young population, thousand people	25.7	24.1	-1.6
of them:			
- higher education	0.2	0.7	0.5
- post-secondary technical vocational education	0.6	1.4	0.8
- secondary technical vocational education	4	5.1	1.1
The share of employed youth with higher education level in the total employed population, %	0.07	0.19	0.12
The share of employed youth with post-secondary technical vocational education in the total employed population, %	0.20	0.38	0.18
The share of employed youth with secondary technical vocational education in the total employed population, %	1.35	1.39	0.03

Source: Own elaboration based on [11]

A similar situation was also observed in the evolution of the share of employed youth with the level of post-secondary and secondary technical vocational education. The precarious situation on this issue was also mentioned in the Concept on the reorganization of the research-innovation, rural education and extension system of the agri-food sector [4], emphasizing that starting with 2013, the employment rate of the graduates from the centers of excellence and colleges has been steadily decreasing, with the lowest share in 2017 - 31.9% of the total number of graduates. At the same time, it was stated that the highest employment rate (41.27%) was achieved in 2014. Another problem is the low level of employment according to the completed field of study. Thus, only 19.8% of the graduates 2017 are employed in the field of their professional training, while 10.2% have been employed in other fields, 1.9% work in their own or family business, 13,2% went abroad and 8.5% do not perform any activity [4].

In this context, the obvious question arises: what are the factors that determine, or, more precisely, suppress the desire to work in the field of completed professional studies? An opinion poll conducted in 2014 on a sample of 210 students enrolled at the State Agrarian University of Moldova in the last academic year highlighted the following reasons of choosing a job in the city at the expense of the agricultural sector: better opportunities to build a career (75% of respondents); better conditions for living and rest (35%); the possibility of continuing studies (30%); higher wages (23%) [7]. Among the most significant problems related to the employment of young specialists, the respondents mentioned: low wages (70%) and high requirements from employers (27%). Regretfully, further investigations [4,5] indicate the continuing presence of the same problems that hamper the insertion of young people into the labour market. Thus, among the difficulties identified, we'll mention that the agricultural sector doesn't allow the valorization of valuable knowledge gained by students in practice [4], the same problem being expressed by the term „over-educated young people" [1].

Concomitantly, as paradoxical as it may seem, employers continue to indicate the lack of important skills to a large number of graduates in order to meet job requirements [4], fact also noted in the interviews with employers carried out by the evaluation committees of the professional education study programmes. It would be possible to solve the problem only through a more constructive dialogue with employers' representatives by involving them more effectively in the process of improving the quality of professional training programmes. This aspect is one of the most recommended by the national quality standards in the field of professional education and falls within the scope of institutional quality management systems [2,3]. However, the practical approach is a difficult one, with a number of problems identified, and namely: reduced availability of employers to cooperate, superficial approach by them of the problems related to the improvement of the programme, refusal to get involved in the practical training of students by providing conditions and support for internships [8].

On the basis of the above-mentioned facts, we deduce the clear need to harmonize and increase the efficiency of the cooperative relations between the actors of professional education and business environment. A possible solution would be to organize a cooperation directed by the competent ministry - the Ministry of Agriculture, Regional Development and Environment, so that in the framework of organized meetings, it would be possible to identify employers' requirements and carry out continuous updating of professional training programmes as required. Given that the efficiency of public money invested in education represents a more acute problem than ever before, we consider that the efforts of the competent ministry in this respect would be justified and would allow to turn the professional education performance into performance indicators of the sectors which receive the „final products" of the institutions performing professional training.

CONCLUSIONS

The strategic provisions of the Republic of Moldova in order to achieve the targets of the sustainable development goals SDG 4 and SDG 8 are timely and argued especially by the precarious situation in the relationship between the professional training system and the segment of qualified young people on the labour market. Rural environment and, implicitly, agriculture are affected to a greater extent by the nominated problem.

Among the major problems related to the employment of agricultural specialists continue to persist the reduced attractiveness of the sector, the insufficient level of wages and living conditions. In addition, there are discrepancies in graduates skills and employers' requirements in terms of competence: while a large number of graduates find themselves over-trained for specific jobs, employers point to the lack of a range of skills.

Based on the above-mentioned facts, the following actions are recommended:

- to create a more efficient mechanism for recording the employability of graduates, which would allow for a more accurate record of their employment and would be a tool for monitoring educational offers;
- to harmonize and increase the efficiency of the cooperative relations between the actors of professional education and business environment through a communication directed by the Ministry of Agriculture, Regional Development and Environment.

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