

PARTNERSHIP WITH STUDENTS AS A FACTOR OF HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTION'S PERFORMANCE AND COMPETITIVENESS

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Abstract

Due to the acute competition in the market of educational services, it is obvious that focusing on students' interests represents a factor of performance and, implicitly, of the competitiveness of each higher education institution. In this context, we can highlight the partnership with students as one of the most effective instruments, which can be used both to diagnose the problems of professional training and to solve them through joint efforts. This investigation is focused on the following objectives: a) assessing the quality of engagement with students in order to increase the effectiveness of vocational training in higher education institutions in the Republic of Moldova and b) experimenting with the method of partnership with students, evaluating the obtained results. In order to achieve the purposes, the following research methods were used: the synthesis of the conceptual approaches of the partnership, the opinion survey method, the interview, the case study. The main conclusions of the investigation reveal the current state and the deficiencies of the students' engagement in the higher educational institutions of the Republic of Moldova, as well as the advantages of the partnership (proven by experimentation) as a factor of effectiveness of the professional education as well as a factor of institutional competitiveness.

Key words: higher educational institutions, partnership, performance, professional education.

INTRODUCTION

The profound transformations that mark contemporary society at present require a reconsideration of attitudes and approaches in all areas of economic and social life, as well as in the field of professional education. Moreover, the professional education sets the foundations of the future specialists training, establishes the area of their competencies, which will later help the graduates to come with their contribution in building a modern society. The process of professional training should be designed and accomplished in such a manner that it becomes, due to its contents and organizational structure, a guarantee of success in a professional life, rather than a preceding stage, which is only meant to issue a diploma that one will attach to the employment application but which has no practical connection with performing job responsibilities and specific tasks it entails. Despite the acute competition that exists nowadays in the market of educational services, it is obvious that only those institutions that will be able to achieve the

performance of training specialists with skills and abilities that match real life requirements will survive.

In the context of the above-mentioned, reconsidering the organization of professional training, including within the higher education institutions, represents a preoccupation, which is the order of the day worldwide and which identified two ways to qualitatively improve the professional education:

- Applying the policies and procedures that encourage good teaching and assessment;
- Changing the focus from the teacher to the learner, defining what learning outcomes students are meant to achieve [3].

Even if the transfer of focus from teacher to student is put on the second place in the above statement, this does not mean it is less important. In fact, focusing on the student, stimulating his/her engagement in the learning process is currently recognized as a factor in enhancing the effectiveness of learning. It is highlighted that effective student engagement in the learning activities makes it possible to identify students' expectations, deepen learning, achieve better results than those that

can be obtained through traditional teaching-learning methods [3,7]. Moreover, in terms of marketization of higher education, the status of students as consumers and co-producers at the same time [5,6] attaches a great importance to them as factors for increasing the competitiveness of a higher educational institution.

Based on the above-mentioned considerations, we support the assertion that the success of the professional education process can be assured if the following principles are observed:

- Encourage the contact between students and faculty;
- Develop cooperation and reciprocity among students;
- Encourage active learning;
- Give prompt feedback;
- Emphasize time on tasks (allocating realistic amounts of time on specific tasks means effective learning for students and effective teaching for faculty);
- Communicate high expectations (high expectations are important for everyone: for the poorly prepared, for those unwilling to exert themselves and for the bright and well motivated);
- Respecting diverse talents and ways of learning (students need the opportunity to show their talents and learn in ways that work for them) [7].

Not coincidentally, encouraging the relationship between faculty and students is put on the first position in the list of principles outlined above. Establishing an effective contact represents a necessary prerequisite for the successful completion of other principles, each one, in its turn, has its own importance. In this context, we conclude that in the theoretical and practical reflections regarding the contact between teachers and university management on the one hand and students on the other hand, the term “partnership activities with students” is increasingly used.

Establishing partnership relations between the university (represented by both university management and academic staff) and students is becoming an increasingly common experience implemented by various higher

education institutions today. Thus, in the UK Quality Code for Higher Education, the partnership is examined in the context of optimizing student engagement in increasing the quality. According to the above-mentioned document, the terms “partner” and “partnership” are used in a broad sense to indicate joint activities between students and staff [11]. The concept of partnership also is examined as an equal relationship between two or more bodies that work together for the same purpose, using their skills, experience, knowledge, and capability [10], a relationship in which all involved gain some benefits: it fosters both student learning and teaching enhancement [8].

The accomplishment of activities based on the partnership with students should comply with certain requirements. Thus, as mentioned in the UK Quality Code for Higher Education, trust and honesty, openness, common goals, regular communication represent the main partnership values [11]. Healey et al. indicate the following requirements for the partnership with students:

- Authenticity (all parties are motivated to invest in partnership and to appreciate objectively their own contribution as well as the partnership parameters);
- Inclusion (the parties contribute with different talents, expectations, experiences);
- Reciprocity (the partnership is beneficial for all parties);
- Empowerment (power is shared fairly and properly);
- Trust (some time is needed to know each other and to have an interactive dialogue);
- Challenge (the constructive criticism as well as the provocative practices are encouraged);
- Community (it persists a sense of belonging with the established community);
- Responsibility (the responsibility for the objectives is shared among parties) [8].

Bovill et al. systematizes the requirements for a partnership activity in three groups. Thus, at the stage of starting a partnership, the following requirements are indicated: ensure that participation is voluntary, start small, use

an appropriate language, select carefully the students for partnership activities, identify aims that are important for all parties, develop support for working, learn from mistakes, be patient. For improving the partnership between students and staff, the following rules are required: develop the partnerships within other works that are going on, offer rewards, diversify the work, offer learning development opportunities for staff and students involved, value the process and formally end partnerships. For extending student partnerships, it is needed to consider your own attitudes to power within student-staff partnerships, to develop ways to negotiate with students and colleagues, to be honest about where power imbalance lies [4]. Sidney University Professor Nick Enfield, in a project that included the elaboration of learning resources through partnership with students, identified in his turn the following requirements for students: affection for the discipline concerned, trustworthy, efficient, creative and intelligent. Among the main qualities of the teacher working with students through partnership were: trust, the ability to have an interactive communication, the ability to navigate between ideas and guide the decision-making process [2].

Along with the above-mentioned requirements, the partnership project itself should be genuine and really bring added value to the university [2].

For the purpose of taking good practice in achieving partnership with students and being able to fully exploit the results of such activities, we need to properly understand the applicative essence of the partnership. In this context, we will refer to the following statement "... all partnership is student engagement, but not all student engagement is partnership" [8]. A quite clear delimitation of the term partnership from other terms used to reflect the collaboration between student and institution could be found at May and Felsing. Thus, by *engagement* the authors designate different levels of participation on behalf of a person (i.e. a student or staff member), dependent upon both the opportunity available, and their choice as an individual. *Consulting* is considered as the

opportunity to express your own opinion, perspectives, experience, ideas and concerns. *Involvement* represents the opportunity to have a more active role, including by controlling the process of implementing ideas. *Participation* involves decision making by individuals to participate in a process or to assume a more active role. *Partnership* is considered as a collaboration (for example, between the student and institution), involving joint ownership and common decision-making regarding the process and outcomes [9].

Examining consulting, involvement, participation and partnership as qualitatively different forms of engagement, Healey et al. highlight them as successive stages of student engagement: I. Consulting; II. Involvement; III. Participation; IV. Partnership [8].

MATERIALS AND METHODS

In order to achieve the objectives of the investigation, a synthesis of the conceptual approaches of the partnership as a qualitative expression of student engagement in increasing the quality of professional education was made. Also, it was carried out an empirical study regarding the level of engaging students in different didactic activities. The mentioned study was based on an interview with the representatives of the university management, academic staff and students from 6 higher education institutions from Republic of Moldova (about 180 representatives of the managerial and didactic staff and 220 students) and a survey including a total of 543 students from 8 higher education institutions. As a result of processing the interview and opinion poll data, conclusions were drawn regarding the student engagement quality, an important factor for rising the effectiveness of professional training in the higher education institutions of the Republic of Moldova. The research was continued with experimentation with the idea of partnership on the basis of a case study with the Agrarian University students. Based on the analysis of experimental results, a number of positive consequences of that partnership were highlighted, which were also identified as

benchmarks of institution's competitiveness in the market of services in the educational field.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Within the higher education system of the Republic of Moldova, the term *focusing on the students' interests* is used more and more frequently, being recognized as a factor of the management system's quality. The external evaluation standards of the Bachelor's degree programmes include the active involvement of students as beneficiaries of the educational services offered by each institution, both at the design stage of the study programmes and in the process of their improvement [1]. The students have an important role in evaluating the quality of implemented activities including the teaching-learning-evaluation process, and are encouraged to propose solutions for their improvement and to submit proposals for the modernization of the overall programme.

The interviews with the representatives of the university management, academic staff and students from 6 higher education institutions (about 180 managerial and didactic staff and 220 students) highlighted the fact that most of the interviewed persons (about 85% of the managerial and didactic staff and 95% of students) associate student engagement in enhancing the quality of study programmes with consulting activities at the stage of study programme design and semestrial assessment of the course quality.

In order to obtain more accurate results regarding the quality of student engagement in the educational activities, a survey was conducted on a sample of 543 students from 8 higher education institutions of the Republic of Moldova. The processed results of the investigation indicated the following facts:

- 32% of the surveyed students mentioned that they were never asked for their opinion on the quality of activities included in the study programmes;

- 95% of the surveyed students, on the request to express their opinion on some issues that need to be improved, indicated 5 and more

aspects regarding the quality of study programmes;

- 66% of the surveyed students declared that the proposals they made to improve the study programme were not implemented.

As for the third statement, we will mention that the above-mentioned interview also identified the problem of insufficient feedback in the process of student engagement in the activities meant to increase the quality of study programmes - over 60% of the interviewed students said they were not aware of the measures taken as a result of their participation in the discussion of the programme content or the assessment of course quality. Therefore, we can not rule out the possibility that the institutions were more receptive to students' suggestions, but did not inform students about it. Even admitting such a situation, however, we identified the existence of the following problems regarding student engagement in increasing the quality of study programmes in the higher education institutions of the Republic of Moldova:

- insufficient level of student engagement, which is mainly done through consulting, this being just the incipient phase towards partnership, if we focus on the approach of partnership stages developed by Healey et al. [8];

- extremely low level at which feedback is given regarding the actions proposed by students.

Carrying out such a study, which focuses on identifying the problems that exist in achieving student engagement to enhance the quality of professional education, together with other useful information, also offers the possibility to make a comparative diagnosis of the situation, which is extremely important given the existence of competition in the market of services in the educational field. Table 1 compares the data related to the State Agrarian University of Moldova and the average data on all the investigated institutions.

Table 1. Analysis of survey results at the State Agrarian University of Moldova compared to the average results on 8 investigated institutions, %

The content of assertion	The average results per 8 higher education institutions	The average results - State Agrarian University of Moldova	The average absolute deviation (+/-) in SAUM compared to the average data for all institutions
They have never been asked to comment on the quality of study programme activities	32	40	+8
The proposals with reference to the improvement of the study programme were not implemented	66	69	-3

Source: Own determination.

Based on the data presented in Table 1, we conclude that the level of student engagement at the State Agrarian University of Moldova in enhancing the quality of the educational process is lower than the average data on the investigated institutions: by 8% more of the surveyed students said they never were asked to express their opinion on various issues and the number of students who declared that their proposals were implemented is by 3% lower than the general average for all institutions.

In order to experiment with the idea of partnership with students at the State Agrarian University of Moldova, the students of three academic groups were invited to participate in the elaboration of learning resources and/or improvement of the existing ones on the MOODLE platform at a certain course. 35 students were involved in that activity. The activity involved the following development stages:

I. An initial survey was conducted in order to diagnose the level of student engagement in works related to enhance the teaching-learning-evaluation process quality. As a result of processing the survey data, it was found that 62% of students contributed to improve the quality of the teaching-learning-evaluation process only by offering proposals, out of which only 11% were involved in examining the proposed variants and selecting the optimal ones. Of the total number of surveyed students, only 6% mentioned that they personally participated in certain activities related to the improvement of the study programme made in collaboration with the faculty;

II. The task was explained - to examine the learning resources placed on the MOODLE platform for a certain course, to identify to

what extent they contribute to the achievement of the course objectives through the prism of skills to be acquired (the latter could be found in the analytical programme on the same platform) and come up with proposals regarding the learning resources to be reviewed or added. The deadline for submitting proposals has been set - 7 calendar days. It was agreed that the proposals should be submitted in written form. In order to motivate students, it has been agreed that, depending on the extent of the individual work, each participant will receive a grade. At the same time, the benefits of a better quality material that will help students to prepare for exams were explained.

III. The proposals made by students were then examined by the teacher. Some additional specifications were necessary to correctly target participants' efforts. Throughout the activity, an active, group and individual communication was maintained; each effort has been appreciated, the interventions in directing student activity being done with great care, avoiding criticism.

IV. The proposed variants and supplements for the learning resources were examined by the student groups. The reasons why some could be accepted and others not (for example, proposals to add some text fragments) have been explained. The analysis of the performed work and the choice of the variants proposed for implementation were done through an interactive discussion, aiming at the objective that each participant expresses his/her opinion regarding the changes and the final decisions to be seen as a common product, but not as one adopted unilaterally by the teacher.

V. After completing the course and passing the exam, the students who participated in the experiment were invited to participate in another survey, which allowed to find out the following facts:

- 100% of the participants declared that their engagement in the activity helped them to increase their success at that course;
- the students highlighted a number of benefits of the performed activities, among which they mentioned the most frequently the following:
 - a) enhancing the quality of learning resources;
 - b) increasing own responsibility for success as a result of participating in the process;
 - c) increasing the quality of communication with colleagues;
 - d) improving the teaching style of the teacher.

The generalization of the facts exposed above helps us to conclude that even if the partnership with students represents an activity requiring considerable time and effort, its achievement has multiple positive effects on the quality of the professional education, including through the qualitative improvement of the teacher-student and student-student communication, and, thus, creating a favorable learning climate, as well as increasing personal responsibility for the learning process. All these favorable consequences constitute the benchmarks of the performance of an educational institution which, being appreciated by the students as beneficiaries and promoted in the right way can become an essential factor of competitiveness in the market of educational services.

CONCLUSIONS

Under the current conditions, generated by the acute competition in the market of educational services, the students have to be examined more than ever as consumers and co-creators at the same time, giving them the possibility to make their contribution to the improvement of performance and, implicitly, of the competitiveness of each institution.

Despite the fact that in the higher education system of the Republic of Moldova the term "focusing on students' interests" is no longer a new one, the investigations show that

students' potential to contribute to the improvement of the quality of professional education is insufficiently used, they being often only consulted, ignoring the possibility of doing some activities in partnership with them.

As a consequence of experimenting with a partnership activity with students at the State Agrarian University of Moldova, it was found out that even if such activities require considerable time and effort, their achievement have multiple positive effects on the quality of professional education, including through the qualitative improvement of the teacher-student and student-student communication, and, thus, creating a favorable learning climate, as well as increasing personal responsibility for the learning process.

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