

IDENTIFICATION OF THE RELEVANT STAKEHOLDER GROUPS - THE FIRST STEP TO THE STRATEGIC STAKEHOLDER MANAGEMENT IN AGRICULTURAL HIGHER EDUCATION - A STUDY CASE IN THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA

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Abstract

The growing competition in the market of educational services requires increased efforts to ensure an adequate quality of the educational products offered by vocational education institutions. However, reaching the adequate quality standards is impossible without the active involvement of stakeholders. Only through the synergy of the efforts of all groups of stakeholders, the progress in the quality of educational services provided can be achieved - a particularly important task especially for agricultural vocational education, which has a strategic significance for the Republic of Moldova. Knowing and correctly perceiving their role in this regard is required as an indispensable factor of quality and performance. The basic objectives of the research were: a) mapping the stakeholders of the State Agrarian University of Moldova; b) evaluation of the stakeholders' perception by the management team and the university staff. In order to achieve these objectives, the following research tools were used: the synthesis of a series of scientific publications with reference to the emergence and evolution of stakeholder theory in higher education; mapping process; structured thematic interview; tabular and graphical presentation of the primary data; structural analysis; descriptive method. As a result of the research, the mapping of the stakeholders of the State Agrarian University of Moldova was performed. Also, the areas that require intervention in the quality of stakeholder perception by university managers and teaching staff were identified: more active promotion of the value of stakeholders; increasing the level of involvement of the teaching staff in collaborative activities with external stakeholders.

Key words: competition, higher education, quality, performance, State Agrarian University of Moldova, stakeholder

INTRODUCTION

Growing competition in all areas of activity requires more efforts to identify the most effective tools for ensuring performance. In this context, the attention of researchers and practitioners is increasingly focused on stakeholders/ beneficiaries of the goods offered, their role in ensuring the success of organizations being obvious. Implicitly, the term "stakeholder" (borrowed from English) penetrates more and more insistently into the scientific and managerial language.

In order to improve the knowledge on the ways of optimal use of the relations with the stakeholders for the success of the activities carried out, a large number of scientific research have been made, thus crystallizing the theory of the stakeholders. At the same time, there are a number of issues related to

both the conceptual approach of stakeholders and the quality of their use by organizations, including educational ones.

Being stated as a managerial conception of organizational strategy and ethics, stakeholder theory is based on the idea that the organization's success depends on the quality of managing the relationships with key groups, such as: consumers, employees, suppliers, communities, financiers, etc. which may affect the achievement of objectives [5; 13]. Although considered relatively new, stakeholder theory is driven by a growing interest from both researchers and practitioners in various fields [2; 3; 4; 5; 6; 13]. In 1995, Donaldson and Preston found out that since the publication of Freeman's book "Strategic Management: A Stakeholder Approach" in 1984, there have been edited about a dozen books and more than 100

scientific papers with a main focus on the concept of stakeholder (mentioning the contribution made, through books and articles, by Alkhafaji, Anderson, Brummer, Brenner, Cochran, Clarkson, Goodpaster, Hill, Jones, Wood, etc.) [3]. Certainly, today the number of publications on this subject is much higher. At the same time, there is a lack of common views on a series of related issues, this fact being noticed by researchers in the examined field [2; 3; 4; 13]. A first divergence can already be identified at the stage of defining the term "stakeholder". Researches show that, in its historical evolution, the concept of stakeholder has amplified, starting from the meaning of "a person entrusted with the stakes of bettors", later being complemented with the meaning "one who has a share or an interest, as in an enterprise" [2]. The conceptual approach of stakeholders differs from case to case, especially based on the concrete examined actors. Thus, while some authors refer to stakeholders as only to the individuals or groups who have the power to directly affect the future of an organization, others call for a wider range of people, groups, or organizations to be considered, which have no power of influence, such an approach being considered more compatible with the principles of democracy and social equity [2]. We justify the broader approach of stakeholders, due to the fact that the absence of direct influence does not mean the complete absence of influence - the future and sustainability of the organization may be affected indirectly as a result of their decisions and actions. In this context we can highlight, as having an optimal relevance, the definition given by Freeman (quoted by Wang et al.) that defines stakeholders as "any individual or group of individuals either impacted upon the company or able to impact on the achievement of its objectives" [13].

The right, comprehensive approach to stakeholders is especially important for any entity. Thus, some of them are important for the organizational performance, while others are important because of the impact caused by the organization on them. The role of the organization is to be aware of both categories and to manage them successfully, „the former

for reasons of effectiveness, the latter for reasons of legitimacy and ethicality" [11]. By disregarding certain categories of actors, the opportunities to be successful and competitive are diminished.

The significance of the correct approach of stakeholders by higher education institutions is as great as in the case of organizations in any other field, being noticed even its increase in the contemporary university environment [8]. Moreover, the process of marketization of the vocational education has been imposed by major changes in the market of the educational services, requiring considerable administrative efforts to balance the internal needs for differentiating programs with the external ones in order to integrate them into a wide community [12]. Today, universities are increasingly examined in terms of economic and social contributions. Thus, before defining relational priorities and strategies, universities need to identify stakeholders and their needs, even if this is not an easy task [8]. The first step would be to start from the specifics of the educational and scientific university offer and, respectively, to determine who would have interest in the respective services, directly or indirectly, immediately or in the medium and long term. Such an approach to the problem is also confirmed by the definition of the stakeholder set out in the Romanian explanatory dictionary: "body or category of people with major interests in the conducting and results of the company's activities" [11].

A comprehensive synthesis of the approaches regarding the stakeholders of higher education institutions can be found in the work "Identifying stakeholders in a Portuguese university: a case study" elaborated by the group of authors: Mainardes, Alves and Raposo [8] in which 25 researches in the respective field have been analyzed and generalized. There can be mentioned the great interest to the subject and the perseverance of the respective group of authors, taking into consideration that, in a previous study [1] they identified and analyzed 16 papers focused on the stakeholders of higher education institutions. With regard to the nomination of higher education institutions` stakeholders, we

find out that the views are very varied. Thus, while some researchers refer to stakeholders only as 2-3 actors, internal or/and external ones, others present much larger lists [8; 9; 13]. Based on the reasoning set out above regarding the need to identify all people and organizations interested in the educational and scientific services provided by universities, we consider relevant the broader approaches of stakeholders. At the same time, among the attempts to systematize the stakeholders, we can mention Kettunen [7] who considers that the stakeholders can be classified in two categories: internal and external. The author refers to internal stakeholders, students and staff, while consumers and partners are included in the category of external ones. According to Mainardes et al. [8], we can also distinguish between individual and collective, as well as academic and non-academic stakeholders. It should be noted that the identification of stakeholders in higher education institutions represents the initial component of the strategic stakeholder management, the latter involving the following stages: I. Identification of the relevant stakeholder groups for organizational management; II. Establishing the significance and level of participation of each stakeholder group; III. Assessing the extent to which their needs and expectations are met at the current stage; IV. Changing corporate policies and ranking priorities in accordance with stakeholder interests [8].

The question: "Why is it important to systematize the stakeholders of higher education institutions?" can be answered by the following arguments: a) the systematization process can ensure a more accurate and comprehensive identification of actors interested in the educational and scientific offer of higher education institutions; b) the systematization itself facilitates the process of modeling the system of relations between the educational institution and stakeholders, but also between different actors, so as to optimize the quality of those relations. In the context of those highlighted above, we will refer to Kettunen who states that for higher education institutions it is important not only to identify

stakeholders, but also to classify them in order to connect them to strategic management [7]. A similar vision can be found at Mainardes et.al [8], who, as previously mentioned, highlights the process of identifying and systematizing stakeholders as an initial stage of strategic stakeholder management.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The research methodology was focused on the objectives pursued, namely: a) mapping the stakeholders of the State Agrarian University of Moldova; b) evaluation of the stakeholders' perception by the management team and the university staff. In order to achieve the first objective, the synthesis of a series of scientific publications referring to the emergence and evolution of stakeholder theory, their role and composition was carried out. By using the mapping process, the stakeholders of the State Agrarian University of Moldova were systematized. For the second objective, an opinion survey was conducted on a sample of 103 respondents, including: 7 representatives of senior management, 8 representatives of faculty management (deans and vice-deans), 7 heads of department and 81 representatives of the teaching staff. For this purpose, the method of the structured thematic interview was used, being conducted between February and July 2021. For the primary data processing, the tabular and graphical presentation was used. The analysis of the obtained data was performed using the structural analysis and the descriptive method. The research limitation is related to the low representativeness of the teaching staff in the composition of the researched sample.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

At the present stage, higher agricultural education in the Republic of Moldova is facing particularly strong market pressures, generated mainly by the continuous and rapid reduction in the number of candidates for studies and, as a result, by increasing competition in the market of educational services. Due to the low image of agriculture, it is obvious that in order to be competitive,

the State Agrarian University of Moldova (this being the only agricultural higher educational institution in the country) must make greater efforts compared to the education institutions focused on other industries. Moreover, the respective university is often examined as a promoter, but also blamed (unjustifiably) for the problems related to the efficiency and, implicitly, to the image of the agricultural activities. In the context of the above mentioned, we deduce that the correct identification and systematization of all stakeholders, the design of a system of effective, rational relations with them is required as a factor of great importance for the success of the institution. At the same time, it is important to take into consideration some significant aspects, deduced from the related research, and also the lessons learned: a) stakeholders do not exercise only separate influences, most often being in relationships with each other. As a result, the educational institution must be able not only to manage correctly and as effectively as possible the relationship with each of them, but also to make the best use of the results of the synergy of the efforts of

different actors. Moreover, the institution must facilitate this system of relations; b) if the impact exerted by some stakeholders is direct and immediate, others exert indirect influences. On this basis, we consider it relevant to classify stakeholders not only by origin, in internal and external ones, but also depending on how they exercise influence, in stakeholders of the university microenvironment and of its macro environment. Thus, the actors who can directly and immediately affect the activity of the institution will be referred to the microenvironment, while those who cannot exert an immediate influence - to the macro environment. Respectively, for each category, appropriate motivation and communication tools should be identified, in order to increase the quality of the activities carried out by the educational institution. Based on the synthesis of opinions regarding stakeholders, presented by various researchers and practitioners, as well as taking into consideration the endogenous and exogenous environment of the examined institution, a mapping of stakeholders was performed, as shown in Figure 1.

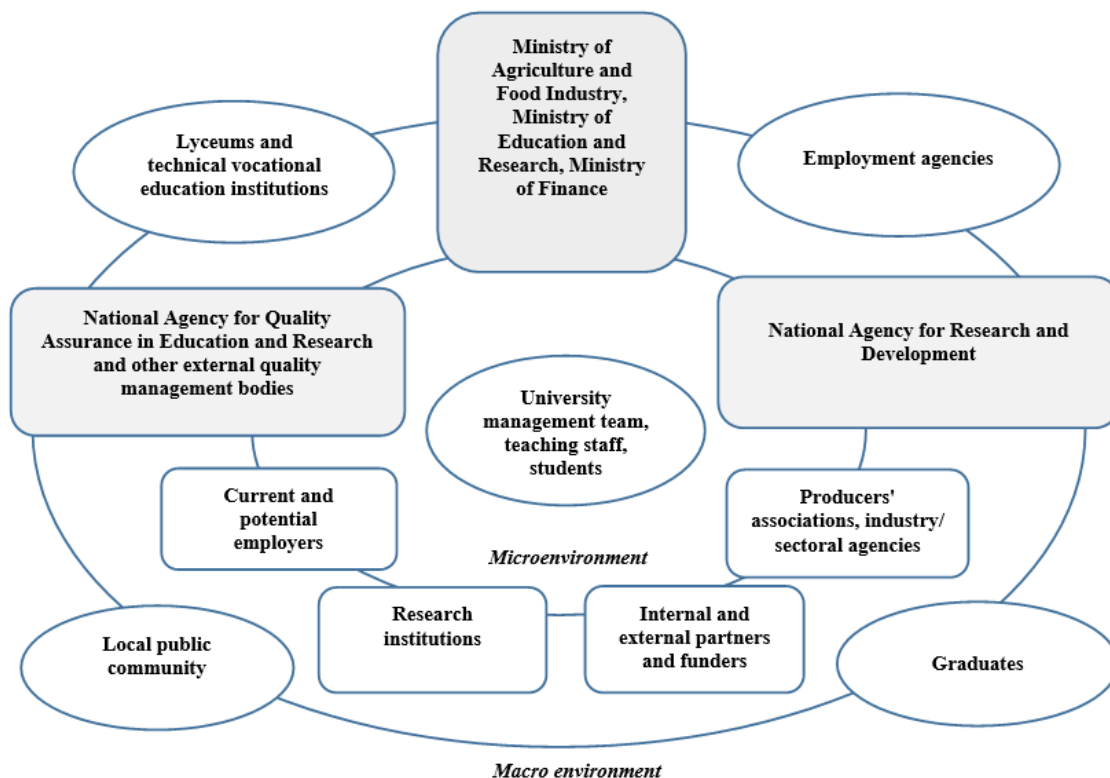


Fig. 1. Mapping stakeholders of the State Agrarian University of Moldova
 Source: Developed by the authors.

According to the data in Figure 1, there are at least four actors that form a stable microenvironment of the educational institution: employers; various producer associations as well as industry/sectoral agencies; research institutions; internal and external partners and funders (partner institutions in various joint educational and research projects, external funders etc.). To the stakeholders of the institution's macro environment can be referred: employment agencies; graduates; lyceums and technical vocational education institutions; the local public community. At the same time, based on the large number of responsibilities of certain actors, some of which being subject of the direct relations with the institution, while others having an indirect impact on it, we consider that three categories of stakeholders can be referred both to the microenvironment and macro environment: three ministries; the National Agency for Quality Assurance in Education and Research and other external quality management bodies; the National Agency for Research and Development.

The usefulness of stakeholder systematization can be argued by the following: a) by highlighting the stakeholders in more detail, premises are created for establishing the collaboration relations with a wider series of actors, thus optimizing their contribution in increasing the quality of the services provided by the institution; b) by systematizing the external stakeholders by groups, respectively of the microenvironment and macro environment, the process of identifying the motivation tools and, implicitly, of involving each actor in activities aimed at increasing the quality of the educational and scientific offer of the institution is facilitated.

At the same time, it is important to emphasize the need for an individual approach to stakeholders, i.e. their correct systematization for each separate institution. This reasoning is based on the idea that, along with the existence of common stakeholders, such as, for example, the National Agency for Quality Assurance in Education and Research, depending on the industry orientation, each institution has also its specific stakeholders, such as the relevant ministry, certain research

institutions, producers' associations, industry/sectoral agencies etc.

The role of stakeholders for higher education being recognized, we also need to mention the numerous problems related to their involvement in the life of the institution. So, while the educational institution can benefit immediately from the results of cooperation with most of the stakeholders, they, in turn, do not have instant effects. As a result, there are often difficulties in engaging them in cooperative activities [10]. On the other hand, the institution's efforts are not always sufficient and adequate, an initial difficulty being even the wrong, incomplete perception of the stakeholders by the representatives of the educational institutions. The last reasoning is argued by the results of the opinion survey conducted at the State Agrarian University of Moldova on a sample of 103 respondents. The structure of the total sample is shown in Figure 2, it's representativeness being represented in Table 1.

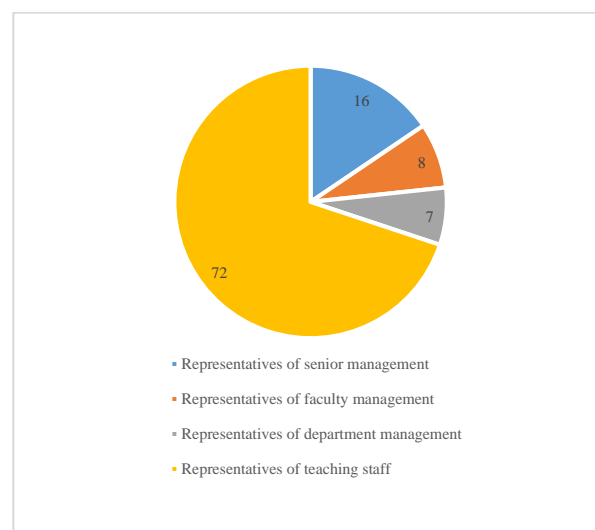


Fig. 2. The structure of the sample included in the opinion survey conducted at the State Agrarian University of Moldova

Source: Developed by the authors.

Based on the data in Table 1, we find that if the average representativeness of the sample is 42%, the coefficient of representativeness varies by categories of respondents. Thus, the highest representation is attested by the category of senior managers, this being 88%, while the representation of teaching staff is only 38%.

Table 1. Representativeness of the sample of the opinion survey conducted at the State Agrarian University of Moldova

Categories of respondents	Number of SAUM staff in the respective category, pers.	Number of respondents in the respective category, pers.	Representativeness coefficient, %
Senior management	8	7	88
Faculty management	12	8	67
Department management	13	7	54
Teaching staff	214	81	38
Total	247	103	42

Source: Developed by the authors.

Based on the above, we deduce as a research limitation - the low representativeness of the teaching staff in the composition of the researched sample.

The processing of the results of the opinion survey allowed a series of findings to be made. Thus, to the question: "What does the term 'stakeholder' mean to you?" only 34% were able to provide a more comprehensive answer, mentioning, as essential features, both the interest in educational services offered by the institution and the impact of stakeholders on quality and, implicitly, performance. The other respondents highlighted as a defining feature: influence on the quality of educational and scientific services - 41%; interest/benefit from the institution's offer - 17%; adoption of decisions regarding the employment of graduates - 3%. 5% stated that they cannot formulate an exact definition of the university's stakeholders.

By generalizing the answers provided by the interviewees to this first question, we can appreciate the fact that almost half of the respondents are aware of the impact of stakeholders on the quality of the institution's offer, this being a premise for efforts to involve them in increasing the quality. At the same time, the existence of a considerable number of university representatives who perceive stakeholders only through the prism of unilateral interest, as well as those who cannot provide a certain approach, denotes the presence of essential reservations to increase the quality of stakeholder relations.

To the question "Who do you consider to be the internal stakeholders of the university?" the majority of respondents (88%) offered relevant answers, highlighting students, teaching staff, the management team. 2% also mentioned the syndicate. However, 7% omitted the students, while 3% also mentioned the relevant ministry.

If the internal stakeholders are better known by the university representatives, when they were asked to highlight the external stakeholders, relatively larger lists were exposed only by 22%. Here we can appreciate the fact that employers are found in the answers of 99 out of 103 respondents. At the same time, the omission of important external actors by most respondents proves the low awareness of the impact they can have on the institution.

Being asked to rank the internal stakeholders by significance, only 36% placed the students on the first position. 34% consider that teachers represent the most important internal stakeholders, and 30% placed the management team on the first position. Being widely recognized the role of students as internal stakeholders, we consider a problem the non-recognition of their major significance as direct beneficiaries of the activities carried out by 64% of respondents.

The results of the ranking of external stakeholders by significance are the following: 85% placed employers on the first position, this being a correct approach; 9% placed the National Agency for Quality Assurance in Education and Research on the first position; 5% placed the relevant ministry on the first position; 1% erroneously indicated students as the most significant external stakeholders. By comparing the quality of stakeholder perception by the representatives of the management team and the teaching staff, we find the following: a) while most of the representatives of the management team can give a relevant definition to stakeholders, the majority of the teaching staff representatives erroneously elucidate the respective concept; b) if the internal stakeholders are perceived relatively equally by both groups of respondents, the external stakeholders are better known by the

representatives of the institutional management; c) the ranking of stakeholders is also imposed by differences between the two groups of respondents. Thus, while most of the representatives of the management team consider the students the most important internal stakeholders, almost half of the interviewed teachers give priority to the institutional administration. At the same time, we can positively appreciate that both groups of respondents considered employers as the most important external stakeholders of the institution. The differences found in the perception of stakeholders by both groups of respondents are elucidated in Figure 3.

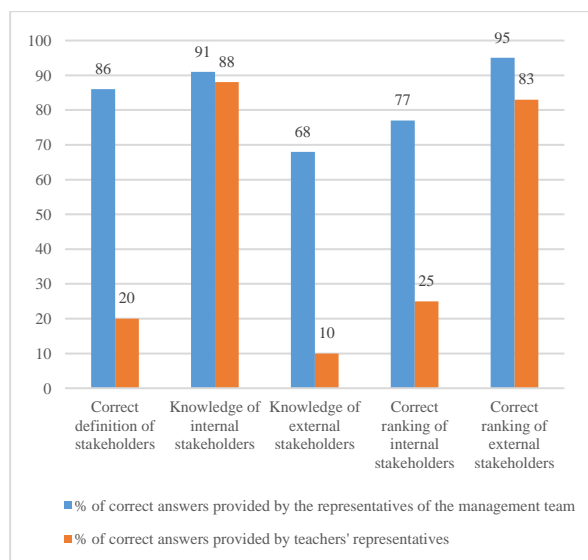


Fig. 3. Comparative analysis of the correctness of the perception of the stakeholders by the representatives of the management team and of the teaching staff in the State Agrarian University of Moldova
Source: Developed by the authors.

By generalizing the above, we deduce the following: having been identified a relatively large number of stakeholders of the State Agrarian University of Moldova, there are deficiencies in their correct perception by the internal actors of the institution. Thus, the inability of a considerable part of the respondents to reproduce the essence of stakeholders denotes an incomplete understanding of their significance in ensuring the performance of the institution. This conclusion is also argued by other errors made by respondents, in particular in identifying and prioritizing external stakeholders, which

is a first sign of the insufficient involvement of the latter in the university activities.

The differences found in the quality of stakeholder perception by the two groups of respondents, in turn, prove the existence of greater deficiencies in teacher involvement in cooperative activities with stakeholders. Based on the reasoning that teachers are the ones who contribute directly to the transfer of the labor market requirements in the content of study programs and, respectively, in the competencies of future specialists, we consider that this issue requires immediate intervention.

CONCLUSIONS

Stakeholder mapping is required as a relevant and effective tool for identifying all stakeholders in the activities of vocational institutions which, in turn, determine, directly or indirectly, their performance and sustainability. Applying stakeholder mapping is an early stage in establishing an effective system of collaborative relationships with all stakeholders.

As a result of mapping the stakeholders of the State Agrarian University of Moldova, there were identified four actors of the institution's microenvironment, four actors of the macro environment and three categories of actors who, by virtue of their broad attributions and responsibilities, simultaneously refer to the microenvironment and macro environment. The classification of stakeholders by categories creates the necessary premises for establishing the relationship with a wider range of actors, for identifying the certain way of collaboration with each one, as well as for the opportunities to benefit from the results of the synergy of their efforts.

Despite the existence of numerous studies on the stakeholders of higher education institutions, and also of the growing need for optimal use of stakeholders to ensure an adequate quality of educational and scientific performance, there is a number of problems at the level of perception of stakeholders by the representatives of the State Agrarian University of Moldova, namely: a) insufficient knowledge of external

stakeholders; b) insufficient awareness of the need to focus on students, as the most significant internal stakeholders; c) the existence of gaps between the level of perception of the stakeholders by the representatives of the management team and of the teaching staff, fact that denotes the insufficient involvement of the teaching staff in the cooperation with stakeholders.

Based on the above findings, we can deduce that more actively promoting the value of stakeholders is an important initial step towards strengthening a strategic management of stakeholders. Implicitly, we can mention the need for more active involvement of the teaching staff in collaboration with external stakeholders, the latter being those who directly contribute to the transposition of the labor market requirements into vocational education's outcomes.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The research was carried with the support of the project "Predictive approaches to increasing the quality of skills in agricultural

higher education based on the partnership with the business environment", No. 20.80009.0807.41, contracting authority – the National Agency for Research and Development.

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