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HIGHER EDUCATION IN UKRAINE: MODERN CHALLENGES AND WAYS FOR OPTIMIZATION

The article is devoted to the analysis of modern challenges in the field of higher education in Ukraine, taking into account global educational trends and domestic realities. The importance of higher education as the main factor for economic and social progress of the state is emphasized.

The directions of higher education reform taking into account the European experience are outlined. Recognizing the significant influence of integration and globalization processes on education, it is emphasized the importance of mandatory consideration of domestic realities in the process of adapting foreign experience.

In addition to the main challenges related to Russian aggression against Ukraine, attention is paid to systemic problems in the field of education that have been accumulating since 1991. During the years of independence, an extensive network of universities was formed in Ukraine due to creation of a large number of private higher education institutions and raising of the status of former vocational schools and colleges. This led to the duplication of educational programs, inefficient use of financial resources, and decrease in the quality of education.

Systemic challenges of domestic higher education are considered, such as declarativeness of the connection between research and teaching, formal approach to evaluation of teaching staff, corruption factors, problematic nature of attracting young employees, taking into account the lack of decent remuneration.

Demographic factors influencing the global trends in the development of higher education are studied. In this context, an example of the foreign strategy of Poland and other European countries aimed at attracting young people from abroad for studies is considered. As a result, external risks for the domestic higher education system are added to the negative demographic trends in our country.

Another challenge facing universities is competition from online courses and other options that are gaining more and more popularity in the education market. Employers pay attention to the necessary knowledge and skills, while a university diploma ceases to be a guarantee of successful employment.

Taking into account the above-mentioned challenges, the main direction for reforming higher education in Ukraine should not be the mechanical merging of universities, but the creation of powerful regional educational centers, capable of training a competitive specialist.

Key words: *higher education, university, education process, higher education institution, training, reforms.*

Problem formulation. Education in the modern world is one of the main spheres of human activity. Its social role is constantly growing. The development prospects for any country largely depend on the education effectiveness. A state losing in education, after a certain time starts losing in all other areas. Higher education, in turn, is naturally considered as the main factor for economic and social progress. Specialists with higher education move the country forward, introduce innovations, become the driving force of economic growth, science and culture.

Losses in education can be more global due to its strategic importance for the progress of society. They lead to the low quality of qualified staff training; the weakness of the formation of human resources personal and value traits; insufficient provision of innovative development of the country; losing positions in international competition, etc. [4, p. 71].

Analysis of recent research and publications.

For many years, educational issues have been the subject of scientific discussions and research. Well-known scholars Ye. Berezniak, V. Bielov, O. Biliakovska, V. Bondar, I. Kaleniuk, V. Luhovyi, T. Lukina, O. Lyashenko, O. Marushyna A. Osmolovska, Zh. Talanova, L. Vashchenko and many others studied the factors and conditions for ensuring the quality of higher education, optimizing educational policy and training process. However, significant dynamic changes have been taking place in the political and socio-economic life of Ukraine during the recent decades. At the same time, globalization processes are intensifying in the world, and the external conditions of educational activity are changing accordingly. These changes actualize the further study of the issues related to improving higher education, its reforms and approximation to world standards.

The purpose of this article is to study the main challenges in the field of Ukrainian higher education and outline the ways for its improvement taking into account the European experience.

Main part. The higher education system of Ukraine is developing and changing under the influence of such factors as European integration and globalization. The country is faced with the urgent issue of moving away from the post-Soviet traditions of higher education with simultaneous adaptation to international, in particular European, experience and preserving its own identity [5].

The reform of higher education, which is supposed to ensure favorable conditions for the formation and development of higher educational institutions, in particular universities, is taking place under the slogan: let's do as in the West. Trying to copy Western models and practices, we do not take into account that Western universities themselves are under complex transformation, which is largely caused by the changes brought about by the modern information society [11].

Today, many people in Ukraine still think that reforming means bringing a certain sphere or system in line with the best models already existing in developed countries. In fact, to reform means to identify contradictions and opportunities in a certain area, while creating appropriate conditions for the realization of the corresponding opportunities. No country has achieved success in reforms by only formally copying and following external models. The best model that has proven to be effective for one country may not be acceptable for another, given its realities, mentality and other factors.

Therefore, it should be clearly understood that the process of reforming higher education should not turn into simple copying of one or another educational model. The implementation of foreign experience must necessarily take into account domestic realities.

The main challenge for Ukrainian education after February 24, 2022 was full-scale external aggression and annexation of territories. All educators were shocked by the situation when people die, infrastructure is destroyed, and millions of people become refugees. At the same time, these events changed our world and made irreversible democratization processes in Ukraine.

In these extremely difficult conditions, the Ukrainian system of higher education, although having suffered significant losses due to the armed invasion, nevertheless stood up. The cohesion of the Ukrainian educational community, the motivation to continue teaching and learning, and the sufficiently effective internal policy of Ukrainian higher education institutions were of great importance within this process. The merit of the international community in providing assistance to educators from Ukraine is invaluable as well [2, p. 75].

At the same time, the traditional systemic challenges in the field of education related to the political instability, frequent changes in the leadership of the relevant ministry, inconsistency of state policy in the educational field, limited funding, corruption, etc., have not disappeared.

According to some statistical indicators, Ukrainian higher education looks quite decent. The level of higher education coverage among the population of traditional official schooling age is high – 82.7%. According to this indicator, Ukraine is ranked 14th out of 131 countries in the 2020 Global Innovation Index. Such coverage is lower in Germany (70.2%, 28th position), Poland (67.8%, 34th position) and Great Britain (60%, 46th position) [7].

Ukraine was ranked 44th in the QS Higher Education System Strength Rankings, which determines the countries with the strongest higher education systems in the world in 2018. According to this rating, Ukraine was ahead of Poland (46th position) and Estonia (47th position). At the same time, there is a huge lag behind the leaders. The top five looks like this: 1 United States 100; 2 United Kingdom 98.6; 3 Australia 93.8; 4 Germany 93.4; 5 Canada 90.4 [13].

According to World Higher Education Database, there are about 18,400 universities in the world. In Ukraine, the network of universities is one of the densest: there are 6.7 universities and 8 colleges or technical schools per 1 million people. The density is even greater in Poland – 9.2 universities (and similar higher education institutions). In Germany and Great Britain, the network is smaller (4.3 and 3.7 universities, respectively [14].

However, it is obvious that the number of universities is not a guarantee of quality higher education. In 1991, there were 149 universities in Ukraine. At the same time, there were 742 colleges and technical schools. The number of universities reached its peak in 2009 – 353 (the number of colleges and technical schools being 528). After that, the number of universities has gradually decreased. As of the beginning of 2019/2020 there were 281 universities, institutes, and academies and 338 colleges and technical schools [3].

A lot of new higher education institutions were created in the 1990s and 2000s. Numerous technical schools managed to raise their status to a higher education institution in order to increase their attractiveness among entrants. Due to this many institutions located in one town offered similar educational programs engaging small number of students. This contributed neither to the quality of education nor to the effective use of intellectual and financial resources.

Almost no Ukrainian university is among the leaders in international rankings. In the ranking of about 1500 best universities in the world “Times Higher Education World University Ranking 2020” there are 9 Ukrainian HEI. For comparison, Poland is rep-

resented by 19 universities, Germany and Great Britain – by about 100 [7].

The competitiveness of Ukrainian universities is hindered by a number of systemic problems that have not been solved for many years. For example, Ukrainian universities are far from a harmonious combination of science and education. Teaching dominates research. The connection between science and education in Ukrainian universities is only declarative.

Fewer and fewer young people devote themselves to science, the number of post-graduate and doctoral students steadily decreases from year to year, and the low effectiveness of scientific research activities of HEI lowers their rating compared to universities in other countries. The number of post-graduate students who, upon completion of their PhD studies, do not present their thesis for defense is unpleasantly impressive.

Corruption is one of the main challenges for Ukrainian education. The fight against this phenomenon is extremely difficult, since corruption permeates all spheres of society. Exceptional punitive measures will not be able to eradicate this phenomenon. The solution should be complex in nature, and important prerequisites for succeeding must be the prestige of higher education and academician's work.

Transparency and clarity of all processes can become real mechanism for overcoming corruption: managerial processes (decision-making, elections), financial ones (funds for universities, directions of their spending), personnel ones (movement, stimulation), etc. [4, p. 76].

It is important to take into account that most problems are created and solved at school, so the modernization of higher education cannot be considered separately from the entire education system. There is a constant and continuous relationship between them.

The university envisages creative cooperation between the teacher and the student. The transition from school, setting simpler tasks and requirements, to university is a difficult and often insurmountable problem for many people. Very often a student continues to study the way he studied at school. And the university itself often offers programs that, in terms of form and content, are either a repetition of high school programs or their continuation. The possibility of creative cooperation between a university teacher and a student means the responsibility of the former and high demands of the latter. The university is impossible without it [11].

Deans, group tutors and teaching staff of all faculties use the word "children" very often. This shows a false ideological attitude. We do not let teenagers understand the responsibility for their lives, actions and behavior. At the same time, the curriculum structures stress on the urgency of universal competen-

cies: the ability to learn, process information, quickly master new technologies, think critically and deal with the tasks creatively. Only an adult who takes responsibility for acquiring knowledge can cope with this challenge. The university should play a leading role in forming such a personality, ensuring partnership relations between students and teachers.

Formalism remains another important problem. The formal approach to the educational process is manifested in the requirements for obtaining certificates of advanced training by teaching staff with an emphasis on the quantity, not the quality; the need for publications, without checking their real demand. Educators in the European countries also complain about bureaucracy and a lot of unnecessary paperwork. However, no one will force the university professor to publish his works in a journal included in one or another database, because it is specified by the regulatory documents.

In the world's leading universities, a real rating for a particular educator is the demand for his classes among students. In Ukraine, a system of rating evaluation of teaching staff has also been introduced. However, it is purely formal and does not affect the further employment or promotion.

We cannot ignore the challenges related with demographic problems. The high dynamics of higher education expansion in Ukraine in the 1990s and early 2000s was based on the birth rate increase in the 1980s. After 2007, a gradual decline in the population aged 18-23 began to be observed, caused by the crisis processes of a sharp reduction (almost by half) of the birth rate since the early 1990s. The decrease in the number of students began in 2008, and since 2011, almost all Ukrainian universities have experienced its considerable reduction [4, p. 78].

As a result, for the universities the struggle for entrants has prevailed over the struggle for the quality of the educational process. On the other hand, the main thing for a student has been to enter a university, without understanding the need to study hard.

Everyone is familiar with the situation when a student comes at the end of the semester, having never attended lectures, and says: "Please, give me 60 points, I haven't been in class because of my work". When studying interferes with work, is it really necessary? We deliver diplomas to the specialist who does not attend classes or appears at the end of the semester and passes all exams with a minimal grade of 60 points receiving bachelor's or even master's degree [6].

It happens because many students tolerate their studies for the first two years, and go to work in the third year. They have not part-time, but full-time work, studying and attending sessions occasionally. Those who want to develop themselves engage in self-education, but many of them regret that they once missed the basic disciplines [8].

Therefore, mass delivery of higher education diplomas is not needed. Such approach will not allow us to compete with European universities.

Developed countries also have demographic problems related with falling birth rates and corresponding decline in the young population. This encourages them to attract young people from abroad.

A clear example of this trend is extremely active strategy of Poland. The powerful information and advertising campaign is the tip of the iceberg of the purposeful educational policy of this state in order to create the most favorable conditions for attracting Ukrainian students. The result of such a policy was an unprecedented increase in the number of Ukrainian students in Poland. Universities of Western Ukraine are already experiencing this policy, which is manifested in the outflow of young people abroad and, along with the general negative demographic trends in our country, creates serious risks for national higher education system [4, p. 76].

The aggravation and diversification of modern competition in education affects not only students, but researchers as well. The phenomenon of international academic mobility is positively evaluated as an opportunity to acquire new knowledge and competencies. However, there is also a reverse side.

Today, university students and teachers easily find programs and projects in order to go to the best foreign educational institutions. Such opportunities are openly offered by Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine. However, there is very little information on the number of those who stayed abroad under such programs, while motivation mechanisms for building a career in Ukraine do not exist at all [5].

Another important challenge leading to the transformation of the educational space is a change in the strategy of success. Modern society forms new values, expectations and understanding of success. Many people have no more illusion that education is a real factor for social mobility and increased well-being. First, the dynamics of social processes are so rapid that the knowledge and skills of most graduates lose their relevance even before graduation. According to the United Nations, more than 200 million young people having graduated from educational institutions do not have the skills necessary for life and work [9].

Employers no longer look at grades in a diploma. Today, they look more at what practical skills a person has, how an applicant communicates, what he writes on the Facebook page, whether he comes to the interview on time, etc. A university diploma ceases to be the mark of quality it was previously considered to be.

"We have never thought that higher education is what it takes to learn well. We have always tried to expand our horizons." – Apple CEO Tim Cook said at one of the meetings in the White House. This is

not least due to the fact that one of the company's founders, Steve Jobs, once dropped out of university without completing his studies. According to Cook, about half of Apple's employees do not have a university degree [10].

Alphabet, which includes Google, also emphasizes skills over degrees. Many jobs require a bachelor's degree or "similar practical experience" [10]. Therefore, a practical course lasting from several weeks to several months can provide more necessary knowledge than many years of university education.

We are observing an interesting trend: universities are losing their walls. They are no longer the only place where higher education is now obtained. And this is not only about online courses. Very often universities cannot provide skills needed in modern life [12].

Consequently, universities must respond to these challenges and take into account new trends. Openness to new things and constant renewal are the key to keeping up with the times. Today, the very essence of education has changed. It is no longer a collection of dates and names, but primarily the formation of a student's worldview. Today, it is becoming more and more important for a modern university, while maintaining all academic competences, to be a platform for open communication and exchange of ideas.

Previously, it was necessary to write down and study, while exams checked the volume and level of information learned by the student. In the modern world, the need to memorize huge amounts of information has disappeared, and the teacher is no longer the exclusive bearer of knowledge.

The modern practice of teaching in higher education institutions shows that it is impossible to solve the problems of improving the education quality according to European standards without rethinking the basics of the learning process itself. The changes cover almost all elements of the educational system, primarily affecting the nature of student-teacher interaction.

The teacher increasingly turns from the organizer of educational work into a student's assistant, tutor and moderator. Therefore, the change in the teacher's role in the educational process affects not only the selection and organization of educational content, but also the definition of methods and technologies of education. All this surely affects the educational process, in particular, strengthening the context of the quality of training [1].

The main official requirements for a university teaching staff are scientific degrees and academic titles. The real demands made by students are completely different. Students are interested in practical experience, teaching methods and worldview. A change in the approach to university management is

urgent. Practical skills and the ability to explain the material in a modern and qualitative way are much more important than a degree. To make sure of this, it is enough to ask any student whether it matters to him if the teacher has a scientific degree and an academic title or not.

When reforming Ukrainian higher education, the primary steps for its implementation should be carefully considered. A popular idea to optimize the educational institutions network requires a clear understanding of what is meant by optimization and what goals it should pursue. If the goal is simply to reduce the number of universities, then this does not contribute to increasing the efficiency of the system.

Reducing the number of universities or merging them is not the way leading to the development of higher education institutions in the country. A few bad HEIs when combined do not form something qualitatively more valuable. Such an approach would rather resemble the Soviet practice of uniting collective farms. It is not about the number, but about the quality of universities [11].

The first place should be the creation of powerful regional higher education centers. It is important not only to carry out external optimization (merging several universities into one), but also to ensure the internal effective organization of the newly created large university.

Good steps in the context of reform have already been implemented. Higher education institutions of Ukraine gained academic, organizational and financial autonomy. The legislation defines as a norm the publication of financial documents and public control over the financial movements of each educational institution. Democratic processes are being strengthened in the election of the rector. For the first time in Ukrainian educational legislation, so much attention is paid to the control of the quality of education. A separate structure was created – a collegial body, the National Agency for Higher Education Quality Assurance [4, p. 76].

A necessary condition for a powerful and competitive university is the preservation of high-quality research and teaching staff. This can be ensured with the help of a decent salary, opportunities for professional growth, and other motivational factors. Rather often students of pedagogical universities do not see themselves in education, but look for other ways to continue their career. Such trends will inevitably lead to the fact that only specialists of retirement or pre-retirement age will remain in education. Who will replace them if the number of young teachers in universities is constantly decreasing? The question is not at all rhetorical and needs an answer.

Conclusions. Summarizing, we note that during the period of Independence, Ukrainian higher education faced global, political, and economic challenges, determined both by global trends and national fac-

tors. The conducted analysis proved that domestic higher education has accumulated a large margin of strength, which is very important not to lose. Ukrainian universities retain a core of enthusiastic teachers. At the same time, there are problems that have not been solved by anyone for a long time. The quality of education has been constantly deteriorating. The massification of university education has led to the devaluation of the university diploma.

The key result of the quality for any higher education institution is a competitive graduate. Therefore, it is important for universities to work effectively for training such graduates. In order for universities to have such an opportunity, the authorities must understand that quality education is expensive. Effective work of educational institutions is impossible without proper funding. A university cannot and should not exist only on the money of students.

It should be taken into account that today there are all opportunities to study abroad. Ukrainian universities function in conditions of real competition. As a result, all domestic higher education institutions must ensure high quality of education in order to prove their uniqueness and importance for Ukrainian society or gradually cease their activities.

We considered only a small number of challenges facing Ukrainian education at the current stage. A more detailed study of urgent risks and challenges can become a subject for further scientific research in order to determine the optimal ways of reforming and increasing the competitiveness of domestic higher education.

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Маєв А. П., Насакіна С. В. Вища освіта в Україні: сучасні виклики та шляхи оптимізації

Статтю присвячено аналізу сучасних викликів в сфері української вищої освіти з урахуванням глобальних освітніх тенденцій та вітчизняних реалій. Підкреслено надважливе значення вищої освіти як основного фактору економічного і соціального прогресу держави.

Окреслено напрями реформування вищої освіти з урахуванням європейського досвіду. Визначено суттєвий вплив на освіту інтеграційних та глобалізаційних процесів, наголошується на важливості обов'язкового врахування вітчизняних реалій в процесі адаптації іноземного досвіду.

Окрім головних викликів, що пов'язані з російською агресією проти України, приділено увагу системним проблемам в сфері освіти, що накопичувалися з 1991 року. За роки незалежності в Україні сформувалася розгалужена мережа університетів. Цьому процесу сприяло утворення великої кількості приватних ЗВО та підвищення статусу колишніх училищ та коледжів. Це призвело до дублювання освітніх програм, неефективного використання фінансових ресурсів та зниження якості освіти.

Розглянуті системні виклики вітчизняної вищої освіти, такі як декларативність зв'язку між дослідженнями та викладанням, формальний підхід до оцінювання науково-педагогічних працівників, корупційні чинники, проблематичність залучення молодих працівників з урахуванням відсутності єдиної оплати праці.

Досліджено демографічні чинники, що впливають на глобальні тенденції розвитку вищої освіти. В цьому контексті розглянуто приклад зовнішньої стратегії Польщі та інших європейських країн із залучення на навчання молоді з-за кордону. Як результат, до негативних демографічних тенденцій у нашій державі, додаються зовнішні ризики для вітчизняної системи вищої освіти.

Ще одним викликом, що постає перед університетами, є конкуренція з боку онлайн курсів та інших опцій, що здобувають все більшої популярності на освітньому ринку. Роботодавці звертають увагу на необхідні знання та навички, в той час як наявність університетського диплому перестає бути гарантією успішного працевлаштування.

З урахуванням зазначених викликів основним напрямом реформування вищої освіти в Україні має стати не механічне об'єднання університетів, а створення потужних регіональних освітніх центрів, які здатні підготувати конкурентоспроможного фахівця.

Ключові слова: вища освіта, університет, освітній процес, заклад вищої освіти, навчання, реформи.