

**COMMUNICATION WITH BUSINESS ENVIRONMENT AS A FACTOR
ENHANCING THE IMPACT OF HIGHER AGRICULTURAL EDUCATION
ON THE SUSTAINABLE RURAL DEVELOPMENT**

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Abstract

This paper consists of two parts: a research synthesis on the conceptual approaches to the beneficiaries of higher education institutions, their importance and collaboration requirements; an empirical study highlighting and analyzing the activities related to the communication with the business environment representatives carried out by the State Agrarian University of Moldova in the period 2013-2017.

As a result of the performed investigation, a series of arguments regarding the role of communication with the business environment representatives were formulated in order to increase the impact of higher agricultural education on the sustainable development of the rural areas. Also, the problems faced by the State Agrarian University of Moldova in the communication with the business environment representatives were identified and solutions for the respective problems were proposed.

Keywords: *Higher agricultural education, Sustainable rural development, beneficiary, communication, Business environment*

1. Introduction

The last decade has brought considerable changes in the higher education system of the Republic of Moldova, changes that have brought about inevitable major interventions in the content of the study programmes, implemented educational technologies, quality and amplitude of the cooperation with institutions from abroad etc. However, the intense competition between higher education institutions requires for increased efforts to provide qualitative education, scientific and extension services. It is obvious that, given the existence of a study offer that prevails over demand, the ability of a higher education institution to provide highly qualified specialists for the labour market represents a key factor that will determine potential candidates for studies to choose one institution or another.

As a result, despite the specific conservatism of many academics, when some changes are perceived and sustained with great difficulty, the messages received from the beneficiaries of the services offered by the institution, by the mere decision to apply or not to that institution, acts better than any other stimulator. Thus, we conclude that with the purpose of ensuring its existence and sustainability within the educational and scientific services market, an educational institution should mobilize all its reserves and apply all the possible tools with maximum effectiveness. Among these, the communication with beneficiaries occupies a very important place, including those who represent the business environment.

2. The degree of investigation of the problem currently, and purpose of research

At present, the problem of beneficiaries is widely approached by various scientists being the subject of numerous disputes and investigations. As a result, a theory of beneficiaries has crystallized and it was described by Freeman and Phillips as a managerial conception of organizational strategy and ethics[5]. The authors pointed out that the central idea of this theory is that the success of an organization depends on how well it manages its relationships with such key groups as consumers, employees, suppliers, community, financial bodies and others that may influence the achievement of its goals.

The term „beneficiary” is also increasingly penetrating today’s academic language of the Republic of Moldova, but some errors have been noted in its correct understanding. In this context, we shall refer to the explanatory dictionary of the Romanian language where the word „beneficiary” means a person (physical or legal) to whom, under a contract, a certain product or service is provided [13]. According to Freeman, a beneficiary may be any individual or group under the impact of a company or having an impact on the achievement of company’s objectives [6]. Bryston, referring to public and non-profit organizations, defines beneficiaries as individuals or groups that have the power to influence directly the future of the organization [4].

Therefore, referring to a higher education institution, we could define the beneficiaries as all the individuals, groups of persons or organizations that benefit, directly or indirectly, from the services provided by the institution.

In this context, it is obvious to identify the most accurate meaning of all the beneficiaries and their needs as stated by Mainardeset al. as a preliminary stage in defining the relational priorities and strategies for each entity [9].

Several researches have focused on establishing the categories of beneficiaries of a higher education institution. Thus, Weaver identifies four categories of beneficiaries: government, institutional management, teaching staff and consumers (students, their families, employers and society in general) [12]. Kettunen systematizes the beneficiaries into two groups: internal and external, including the staff and students into the category of internal beneficiaries, and partners and consumers into the category of external beneficiaries [7]. A more detailed classification of beneficiaries could be found in the works of Rowley who considers that the beneficiaries of a higher education institution are the students, their parents and their families, local community, society, government, institutional management team, local authorities, and current and future employers [11].

Regardless of the angle of approaching the problem from the perspective of different researchers, there is an absolute consensus that the involvement of beneficiaries is necessary and inevitable in terms of present activity conditions of the higher education institutions. Moreover, there are a lot of suggestions and recommendations, confirmed by empirical researches, related to establishing the most effective relationships with beneficiaries. Last but not least, we will mention the significance of the theory of beneficiaries, which, as noted by Freeman and Phillis, is a managerial one in the broad sense of the word: it not only describes the existing situations or predicts cause-effect relationships but also recommends attitudes, structures and practices that, taken together, constitute the management of beneficiaries [5].

Considering certain concrete requirements for relationships with beneficiaries, Freeman and Phillis emphasize that in order to maximize the value of the beneficiary within an uncertain time frame, managers should pay attention to the key relationships with them. It is mentioned that the real management of beneficiaries requires, as a key attribute, simultaneous attention to the legal interests of all beneficiaries in establishing the organizational structures, general policies and in the decision-making process[5]. Kettunen, in his turn, came up with the idea that beneficiaries' opinions should be taken into account when implementing the quality management system within the educational institution, but at the same time, it should be taken into consideration that they can also have their own quality assurance systems. Therefore, these two systems should interact with one another in order to ensure a productive collaboration [7].

The cooperation with each category of beneficiaries brings about the academic performance under conditions of effective communication mechanisms, but also taking into account the peculiarities of each category. Even if considerable efforts are required to establish and maintain successful cooperation relations, they are justified by the benefits obtained by the institution, which subsequently turn into benefits for society. The relationship between the success of an educational institution and its contribution to the development of society is eloquently exposed by Barrio-Garcia and Luque-Martinez, who state that the more effectively a university develops knowledge and learning, the greater will be its contribution to collective intelligence and, consequently, the greater will be its success[1].

The purpose of the research is to elucidate aspects of communication with the business environment as a factor for increasing the impact of agrarian higher education on the sustainable development of the rural environment, as well as to analyze the activities related to the communication with the business environment representatives carried out by the State Agrarian University of Moldova in the period 2013-2017.

3. Methods and materials applied

In order to carry out the investigation, the following research methods and tools were used: the synthesis of theoretical approaches regarding beneficiary management; investigating the concept and components of sustainable rural development; interviewing study programme managers from the State Agrarian University regarding the quality of communication with business environment representatives; the synthesis of survey results completed by employers, which was conducted on a sample of 342 people; conducting a survey questionnaire on a sample of 246 students and generalizing the obtained results; formulating conclusions and arguments.

4. Results obtained and discussions

Examining the role of communication with the business environment in order to enhance the impact of higher agricultural education on the sustainable rural development it is necessary to make a distinct elucidation of some essential aspects:

1. Explaining the concept of sustainable development;
2. Identifying ways in which vocational education transfers its values to the rural environment and thereby contributes to its sustainable development;

3. Elucidating the applicative aspects of communication with the business environment as a tool through which the professional agricultural education contributes to the sustainable development of rural areas.

Although the concept of sustainable development is widely approached by many specialists and about 60 definitions have been identified[2], in our opinion, it is of utmost relevance its initial approach in the Brundtland Report of the World Commission on the Environment of 1987, entitled „Our Common Future”. In the context of this report, sustainable development is stated as representing the type of development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to satisfy their own needs [10].

Sustainable rural development is examined in close connection with agriculture. Sustainable agriculture is defined as economically viable agriculture, which meets the requirements of healthy and high quality food demand, guarantees the protection and improvement of natural resources in the long term and transmits these in unaltered form to future generations[2].

It is particularly difficult to estimate exactly the contribution of higher education to the sustainable development of a certain branch, in this case to agriculture and, implicitly, to rural environment, to which this branch belongs, first of all because the process of sustainable development takes place under the influence of a multitude of factors, many of which are unquantifiable. Thus, the development trends of a branch, environment or country as a whole can only be established as the sum of all involved actors, being practically impossible to estimate the exact share of influence of each one.

Another facet of the problem is that higher education, as noted by Brown, represents a „post-experience” good and the benefits of higher education are not limited to the graduate [3]. As a follow-up to the idea, we note the argument that the impact of higher education can only be examined over extended periods of time (several decades), through multiple effects, most of which, as mentioned above, are unquantifiable. In this context, we refer to the famous economist and scientist in education problems McMahan, who mentions that the measurable value of non-monetary benefits of education is so poorly understood so far [8]. The scientist, in addition to graduate’s own benefits (offering better opportunities for work and living) and contribution to sustainable growth, emphasizes the role of higher education in promoting democracy, reducing crime, state’s welfare costs, etc.

At the same time, even being aware of the existence of multiple difficulties in measuring the impact of vocational training on some complex processes related to the sustainable rural development, we should recognize that this does not allow us to avoid taking the responsibility imposed by society for providing skilled workforce able to cope with its core mission - economic and social growth and ensuring the prosperity of the state.

Returning to the subject of the current study, we’d like to mention that in the process of training future specialists for the rural space and being unable to focus on overly broad objectives oriented to exact contributions to the sustainable rural development, we can „narrow” these contributions by targeting at the greatest impact of implementing the rural space functions, focusing on the idea that the graduates of the educational institution, as potential managers and specialists of rural entities, have the mission to contribute optimally to the execution of those functions.

According to the European Charter, each rural area has to fulfill simultaneously three major functions: economic, ecological and social-cultural. Each function involves a series of responsibilities as follows:

- the economic function: responsibilities in terms of food needs; ensuring an appropriate level of income for farmers and their families; ensuring environmental protection; producing renewable raw materials for industry and energy production; meeting the needs of small and medium-sized enterprises and economic agents activating in the sphere of provision of services;
- the ecological function: conservation of natural life resources; protecting biotopes and green areas; maintaining and protecting biodiversity; ensuring the protection of wild animals;
- the socio-cultural function: contributions to maintaining traditional culture and habits as a distinctive and indisputable patrimony of each rural locality, area, region [2].

How can a university, especially the State Agrarian University of Moldova, contribute to the optimal exercise of the rural area functions? The most obvious answer is the following: by training some specialists who, possessing the required professional (professional and transversal) skills and, as already mentioned, acting as managers and specialists of rural entities, could make their contribution in performing the above-mentioned functions. Therefore, identifying the exact delimitation of the range of competencies to be held by the graduates of each study programme, establishing the appropriate study contents and selecting correctly the teaching tools in order to optimize learning represent the set of necessary actions that should be implemented in order to prepare highly qualified specialists for the rural areas possessing a system of values, which enable their maximum contribution to the performance of the economic, ecological and socio-cultural functions.

Here is the „stage entrance” for the representatives of the rural business environment who, in their position of current and potential employers, represent a part of the beneficiaries of the educational services provided by the institution. Namely, this category of beneficiaries, in our opinion, represents the „bridge” linking the objectives of the vocational training system in the specific fields of rural environment and the branches where these objectives will be subjected to valorization. In this context, we highlight the communication with this category of beneficiaries as the most relevant cooperation tool and factor optimizing the contribution of vocational agricultural education to the execution of the rural space functions.

Intending to achieve its mission of creating, preserving and disseminating knowledge at the highest level of excellence, State Agrarian University Moldova, especially in recent years, has given priority to the category of beneficiaries representing the business environment. The ways in which they were involved in debates and consultations on various aspects of the educational process can be classified into two groups:

- those based on direct communication - by organizing meetings (round tables, joint seminars focused on various practical issues, etc.), participation of real sector specialists in the activity of external quality assessment committees, working as members of the internship and thesis defence committees, etc.;
- those based on indirect communication - by involving real sector specialists in the supervision of bachelor's theses, reviewing curricula, reviewing textbooks and other curricular support items, opinion polls, etc.

Making a synthesis of activities carried out by the State Agrarian University of Moldova in the last five years (2012-2017) and based on an interview with the study programme managers, it was possible to formulate a series of conclusions regarding the activities implemented with the involvement of business environment representatives. As a result, we will synthetically present the analysis of these two groups of activities through the prism of the following parameters: expected benefits, encountered difficulties and opportunities for rationalization (Table 1 and 2).

Table1. Analysis of cooperative activities with the business environment representatives carried out by the State Agrarian University of Moldova through direct communication

| Activity | Expected benefits | Encountered difficulties | Opportunities for rationalization |
|--|---|--|---|
| Meetings, round tables, seminars, scientific-practical conferences | Dissemination of performance obtained in the real sector in the field of study programmes offered by the university | Lack of interest of business environment representatives in such activities resulting in low response rate to the invitations for participation. | Identifying topics of common interest that would motivate business environment representatives to participate in such activities. |
| Participation of the real sector specialists in the work of external quality assessment committees | Obtaining opinions on the current level and directions for improving the quality of educational services provided by the university | Lack of initiative of the members of the external quality assessment committees in the thorough investigation of the quality issues, superficial approach of problems. | Informing each committee member in advance with the subjects that will be examined during the meetings; providing additional materials upon request in order to better inform them with reference to the discussed issues; establishing more active collaboration relationships between meetings. |
| Activating as members of the internship and thesis defence committees | Identifying the directions for improving the quality of students' internships. | No difficulties were found | - |
| Activating as members of the final examination committees | Obtaining opinions regarding the quality of the study content at this stage and directions for improving the quality of teaching-learning-evaluation; evaluating the quality of the bachelor's thesis, the relevance of proposals submitted by students regarding activity improvement of entities where students carried out their practical studies; expressing opinions regarding the research methods and tools that will be applied in the future. | Knowledge deficiency in the field of educational technologies; priority focus on practical aspects and sometimes insufficiently on the investigative issues. | Preliminary meetings to familiarize the committee members with the content of the study, applied educational technologies, the system of competences expected from the graduates. |

Table 2. Analysis of cooperative activities with the business environment representatives carried out by the State Agrarian University of Moldova through indirect communication

| Activity | Expected benefits | Encountered difficulties | Opportunities for rationalization |
|---|--|---|--|
| Involving real sector specialists in the supervision of bachelor's theses | Offering concrete recommendations to enhance the quality of bachelor's theses | Lack of knowledge related to all aspects that should be reflected in theses; thorough focus on specific issues, while ignoring other aspects needed to be addressed according to curricular requirements. | Cooperative work with specialists in order to make them more familiar with the requirements of the bachelor's thesis elaboration. |
| Involving real sector specialists in the reviewing of curricula, textbooks and other curricular support elements. | Offering suggestions for improving curricula, enhancing the quality of study content and curricular support elements. | Superficial examination of materials; subjective attitude in the offered proposals. | More rigorous selection of people who can make a real contribution to the improvement of the target material content due to their reviews; informing them in advance about the issues that are not well known to them. |
| Making opinion polls | Evaluating the quality of specialists training within the university; identifying directions for curricula improvement; proposing solutions to improve the quality of internships; presenting information about the availability of the enterprise, which serves as a basis for the internship, etc. | Very low response rate to the institution's message about completing survey questionnaire; superficial approach to the issues addressed in the survey; refusal expressed by a considerable part of the respondents to accept students in their enterprises for internships. | Conducting surveys through direct communication with respondents; replacing, if necessary, the written surveys by interviews. |

In order to continue the description of activities undertaken by the State Agrarian University, we will focus in more detail on the survey designed for employers, which was conducted in 2013 within all the study programmes. At the initial stage, about 650 surveys were sent to the managers and specialists from various enterprises where university graduates are employed. Each survey included a set of questions focused on the following issues:

- employer's assessment of the general level of graduate training especially the level of his/her theoretical and practical training;
- identifying a list of poor practical skills held by graduates;
- expressing opinion on the courses that should be excluded or added supplementary to the curriculum;
- expressing opinion on the availability of the enterprise where they are employed to serve as a basis for internships;
- expressing agreement or disagreement to participate, at least once every two years, in the meetings with students in order to share their experience;
- expressing opinion on solving, together with students, some issues related to enterprise activity.

Based on the interview conducted with the study programmes managers who made the survey, it was found that, with minor differences, all faced the same problems:

- more than 80% of the employers initially asked for their opinions, refused to participate in the survey, citing the lack of time. As a result, the process of sending surveys continued and due to considerable efforts, the people who were willing to communicate were identified at last (feedback received from 342 people);
- about 30% of the respondents' suggestions regarding the improvement of curricula were superficial or contradictory to the real content of curricula (for example, it was proposed to exclude some courses that were not even included in the curriculum, the latter being attached to the survey for more information);
- about 40% of respondents expressed their disagreement to provide conditions for student internships;
- only 65% of respondents agreed to participate at least once every two years in the meetings with students in order to share their experience;
- about 50% of the respondents positively appreciated the initiative to solve, together with students, certain problems of the enterprise.

Based on the above-mentioned results we conclude that among the deficiencies discovered in the communication with business environment, the lack of interest in giving feedback to the institution is most often noted. Thus, if in order to solve another common problem, such as the superficial knowledge of certain aspects of the educational process, one can make more assiduous efforts to inform the target persons about these issues, the very low response rate to the institution's messages and the lack of interest in giving feedback represent a difficulty that requires a special approach. This problem is related to their insufficient motivation to contribute to the quality of university's activities, as long as there are no advantages for the enterprise they represent. In this context, we are aware of the practical significance of researchers' recommendations to consider the beneficiaries' interests as a key element of the beneficiary management [5] to ensure the interaction of the quality management system within the institution with that of the enterprise they are working for [7]. The ideas presented by these researchers represent extremely valuable solutions in solving the problem under discussion and the tools for their application in concrete situations will be identified. Definitely, the process of finding those tools should be done not only with the participation of teachers but also of students who, in their turn, will benefit the most from the optimal use of relations with the business environment. In this context, we will point out to another opinion poll, conducted on a sample of 246 students of the State Agrarian University.

Thus, among other discussed topics, the survey sought to find out students' opinions regarding the contribution of specialists representing some enterprises, which served as a basis for internships, to the development of students' practical skills, the benefits obtained by students as a result of various meetings with the business environment representatives, the level of student placement in various experimental activities or investigations with impact on specific enterprises. At the same time, the students were asked to express their opinions regarding the rationalization of institution's cooperation with enterprises. The analysis of obtained results recorded the following facts:

- the absolute majority of respondents (98.7%) considered the meetings with specialists from various fields organized by faculties as productive;

- about 72% of the respondents positively appreciated the contribution of enterprise representatives in the formation of practical skills required by the internship curriculum, while 28% noted the lack of interest on the part of the enterprise;
- only 3% of the respondents indicated that they were involved in some experiments and investigations that brought benefits to the enterprises where the internship was completed.
- In the context of the discussed problems, the following proposals were made by the students:
 - to identify in advance the issues presenting interest for the enterprises where the internship is completed and include them as tasks of these internships. As a result, the activities carried out during the internship would bring added value not only to the student, but also to the enterprise, which would undoubtedly increase the responsibility of the enterprise for the quality of their achievement;
 - to focus the thematic axis of the research papers and bachelor's theses on concrete problems the enterprises face, supporting the continuity of the performed research within the same enterprise during the internships (didactic, practical, diploma development), reflecting the obtained results in the bachelor's thesis;
 - to organize annually, within each faculty, scientific and practical conferences focused on the totalization of the internship results with the participation of students and business representatives.

Thus, making a generalization of results obtained from various activities with the business environment and taking into account the proposals offered by students, we conclude that the communication process with business environment representatives is a complicated and extremely difficult one. In order to organize it with maximum effectiveness, considerable efforts are needed, but this is justified by the benefits of the parties, which will eventually turn into benefits for the rural environment.

5. Conclusions

Communication with the business environment represents an inevitable tool, which reflects the contribution of vocational agricultural education to the sustainable rural development. This is the only way to identify and develop the skills necessary for future specialists, competencies that can be valorized in the process of performing the rural space functions: economic, ecological and socio-cultural.

Among the deficiencies discovered in the communication with the business environment, the most frequent is the lack of specialists' interest in giving feedback to institution's request, this problem being explained by their insufficient motivation to contribute to the qualitative improvement of the activities carried out by the university since there is no advantage for the enterprise they represent. In order to solve the problem, it is necessary to establish a system of mutually beneficial relations by identifying the areas of common interest, focusing students' tasks on the aspects that are meant not only to increase their skills but also to bring concrete benefits for enterprises.

Even if the rationalization of communication with the business environment requires considerable efforts, they will be redeemed through the benefits of the parties, which will eventually turn into benefits for the rural environment.

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Rezumat

Prezentul articol constă din două componente: un studiu de sinteză al abordărilor conceptuale ale beneficiarilor instituțiilor de învățământ superior, semnificației acestora și exigențelor față de conlucrarea cu ei; un studiu empiric în care s-au relevat și analizat activitățile aferente comunicării cu reprezentanții mediului de afaceri realizate de Universitatea Agrară de Stat din Moldova în perioada anilor 2013-2017.

În rezultatul investigației efectuate, au fost formulate o serie de raționamente cu privire la rolul comunicării cu reprezentanții mediului de afaceri în vederea sporirii impactului învățământului superior agrar asupra dezvoltării durabile a mediului rural. De asemenea, au fost identificate problemele cu care se confruntă Universitatea Agrară de Stat din Moldova în realizarea comunicării cu reprezentanții mediului de afaceri și propuse soluții pentru problemele respective.

Cuvinte-cheie: *învățământ superior agrar, dezvoltare durabilă a mediului rural, beneficiar, comunicare*

Аннотация

Настоящая статья состоит из двух частей: первая часть - синтез концептуальных подходов бенефициаров высших учебных заведений, значения и требований при сотрудничестве с ними; вторая часть - эмпирическое исследование, содержащее анализ проведенных мероприятий Государственным аграрным университетом Молдовы в 2013-2017 годах в рамках взаимодействия с представителями деловой среды.

В результате исследования сформулирован ряд выводов и умозаключений касающихся роли взаимодействия с представителями деловой среды в целях роста влияния высшего аграрного образования на устойчивое развитие сельской местности. Также были выявлены проблемы, с которыми сталкивается Государственный аграрный университет Молдовы в процессе взаимодействия с представителями деловой среды и предложены возможные пути их решения.

Ключевые слова: *высшее аграрное образование, устойчивое развитие сельской местности, бенефициар, общение*

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