**The Individualization of Training in Underfilled Academic Groups and Courses: Approaches of a Ukrainian Private Higher Education Institution**

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**The Ukrainian Context**

Over the last 30 years, Ukraine has already experienced the demographic processes which are to become a major driver of changes in the world in the decades to come. There has been a steady towards a drop in the population, resulting in a decrease in the student body. In 1991, the official population of Ukraine was 51,944,000 and for de­mographic, political and socio-economic reasons it had decreased to 42,153,000 by 2019, with an expected down­ward continuation for the next few years.

The Number of Higher Educational Institutions and Students

According to the Ukrainian State Statistics Service, be­tween 1991 and 2019, the number of educational institu­tions (HEI) such as technical schools, colleges, institutes, academies, and universities decreased by 36% to 652 in­stitutions. During the past ten years the number of HEI offering Bachelor’s, Master’s, and PhD programs has re­duced by 48 to 282. The number of students in 2019 was 1.3 million, while in 2010 it was over 2 million people. Pri­vate sector of education between 1991 and 2005 featured a steady increase both in the number of private HEIs and the number of students. By the early 2000s, the latter account­ed for approximately 11% of the country’s student body. Since 2008, there was a drop in the proportion of students in the private sector caused by demographic problems,the state policy on private educationwhereby private HEIs were denied legal equality with public HEI (the situation is gradually changing for the better), and a decline in trust in the quality of education at private HEI. Official statistics show that around 110,000 students were enrolled in the private HEI in 2019.

The number of state-funded students in the public sec­torhas steadily declined in recent yearsto 44% of the stu­dent body,the remaining 56% are fee-paying students (as compared with 20% and 80% correspondingly by 2000).

Demographic Challenges and their Outcomes

The massification of HE, bordering on universal educa­tion, has resulted in a decline in quality globally, although the decline has manifested itself differently in different countries, regions, and systems. Ukraine which opened its universities to people who were by no means always ready for higher education was no exception. With 80-85% of the age group having the opportunity to enroll in univer­sity, the inherent elitism of university education could not persist. However, with the current developments, it seems possible to identify other trends and areas of positive growth which can be used to respond to the demographic challenges.

With the current changes, the previous strategies of HE systems do not work well, if at all. Almost all HE sys­tems are being reformed and none of them have been completed. It might not be possible to expect any reform outcomes which bring the HE system into line with the time or, according to Ortega y Gasset [1], fully modernize them. However, educational reforms have also become a constant. It is difficult to rely on the experience of other educational systems and other countries to find solutions. Almost everyone is experimenting to compensate for de­mographic and other impacts.

Against this background, it seems appropriate to identify common markers and trends in the development of HE and analyze the activities and outcomes of certain univer­sities, especially if they have strategically determined their innovative development.

In this regard, private HEI, their structures and experience in terms of facing demographic challenges are of interest for a number of reasons. First, since most private univer­sities are notlarge, they are more flexible. Their structures are less bureaucratic, and they are objectively more sus­ceptible to change. Second, they initially focused on inno­vationas they had no state guarantors and had to work out prompt responseson a daily basis.

The Perspective of anIndividual Private University

As mentioned, HE systems differ significantly, as do in­dividual universities. Here we focus on the strategy for compensating demographic challenges offered by an innovative private educational institution operating in Ukraine. The first challenge is the smaller student body, a drop in the quality of their pre-university training, and a noticeable decrease in academic motivation at the ini­tial stage resulting in the need for changes in educational processes and teaching methods. The second challenge is the ill-preparedness of university teachers to work under such conditions, the lack of understanding and willingness to accept the current developments, and the stress caused by working under constant changes making academic staff reluctant to embrace the reforms.

The issue of academic staff is beyond the scope of this pa­per, since our objective is to focus on the ways to face the above two challenges by means of a case study of small pri­vate educational institution operating in a large university center.

Individualization of Training and Under filled Academic Groups

The smaller student body and the lack of scholastic skills necessary to acquire a modern higher education calls for measures that would help prepare the student to meet uni­versity requirements, rules, and culture. University-based preparatory courses play a positive role in this adaptation process. However, there is a decrease in the popularity of such courses and the number of students attending them, brought on by the introduction of external independent evaluation (EIE), a sharp surge in tutoring and the setting up of various school-based EIE preparatory courses.

The university responded to this challenge by introducing a special educational and training course “The Basics of the Student’s Life”. Initially, it was a five-day course; however, experience showed that the course could be reduced to 2-3 days. Its current content and formgive new students anin­sight into the organization of the educational process, uni­versity rules and traditions, approaches to studentresearch activities, the organization of student self-governance, etc. The course program includes lectures, excursions, training sessions, and quests and its implementation is largely the task of the Master’s students.

The underfilled academic groups, which have 5-10 people as opposed to the traditional 25-30, have brought about new approaches to class scheduling, the introduction of

multi-year and multi-program classrooms, an increase in the share of training sessions, individual work, and project tasks. From the financial and economic point of view, such changes are ambiguous, since, while they allow the uni­versity to optimize costs by integrating academic subjects and levels, the changes increase costsas individualization is more cost-intensive.

As things stand, the transition to smaller academic groups is a forced measure taken to optimize costs while preserv­ing, if not developing, the dialogue culture which under­lies any quality higher education, and to work out individ­ualized study programs.

Earlier, the university tried adopting a ‘floating’ examina­tion period which enabled students to take exams and get credits as and when they were ready. However, the experi­ence was far from positive and the ‘floating’ examination period was discontinued. Proving more viable have been weekly catch-up classes and one-to-one tutorials includ­ed in the teacher’s academic load, mandatory in-term and end-of-the-term catch-up classes for low-performing stu­dents, follow-up examination periods and other educa­tional activities.

In this regard, the demographic challenges and the drop in the quality of the students’ pre-university training did not result in a sharp increase in the dropout rate, the annual figures of which range from 4.5 to 10%.

Smaller academic groups and the overall smaller student body have significantly changed the formation of mi­cro-groups and the speed of embracing the cultural and educational environment of the university. In order to op­timize this, and preserve and further develop the academ­ic ethos the university introduced ‘scholarship programs’ to attract high-achieving school graduates and offer them fee-free education. Such scholarship programs, completely covering the costs of a Bachelor’s degree were offered by the university alumni. The presence of high-performin­gand socially activity individuals in academic groups pro­motesthe academic motivation of the whole group.

Management which is slow to change despite a real in­crease in university autonomy and the unwillingness of ac­ademic staff to embrace the culture of change still appear to be the main obstacles to changes in educational activi­ties based on the principles of small academic groups and workable individualized educational paths.

However, the complexity of the tasks does not mean that they should not be solved at all. The impact of demograph­ic challengesis increasing; universities will have to work out how to face them sooner or later.

*References:*

[1] Ortega y Gasset J. (1946). Mission of the University. Transl. by H.L. Nostrand. London: Kegan Paul.