



Ukraine's Higher Education Institutions: Fighting isolation

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Statistically at least, Ukraine is one of Europe's educational heavyweights. It has a staggering number of higher education institutions (HEI), Europe's fourth largest group of graduate students after Russia, the UK, and France, and a long history of higher learning, dating back to the 16th century. Underneath the surface, though, is a system plagued with various afflictions.

To begin with, the country's HEIs are inadequately funded and corruption is endemic. These factors only serve to aggravate the poor performance of Ukrainian HEIs in terms of innovative research, contributions to global knowledge, integration with international networks, mobility of faculty and student populations, links with business, and offering conditions for the formation of national elites that will stimulate good economic and political governance.

In 2005 Ukraine joined the Bologna Process, which aims to create a European Higher Education Area and improve the quality of education across European states, as part of the political process of Europeanizing higher education. Although some progress has been made at the government level, bright spots are few and far between. Yet, even a 100% commitment to the goals of the Bologna Process will not solve Ukraine's problems with post-secondary education. To properly modernize the country's system of higher education requires fundamental reform and a comprehensive educational policy from the government and the will to change the way HEIs are governed— both of which are regrettably lacking.

Corruption: Public Enemy #1

The most widely recognized problem of Ukrainian HEIs is corruption. It is also by far the most visible. One reason behind this visibility is the "media-friendly" nature of corruption related scandals,¹ which leads to endless stories about bribes paid to pass exams, improve grades or gain access to coveted positions. The seriousness of the issue is highlighted by embarrassingly high-profile cases of government officials with questionable or even fake diplomas, including a Simferopol city official with a diploma from a non-existent university and a deputy head of the SBU, the state security service, with a non-existent degree from Taras Shevchenko University.

However, corruption does not always take the form of underhanded transactions. There is a great deal of ambiguity about the common practice of offering private tutoring—some extravagantly priced—, by professors who later administer oral examinations to those same students. While unprofessional, this procedure is not illegal in Ukraine: some professors even register their "consulting" activities officially.

In 2008, the Ministry of Education implemented an external independent standardized test whose aim is to eliminate corruption in the post-secondary admission process. Public universities are particularly

¹ There is obvious appeal in stories like that of a professor from a HEI based in Ternopil who openly passed out a "price list" with each grade: 3 – UAH 50, 4 – UAH 100, and 5 – UAH 150, the equivalents of C, B, and A grades. "Rozpochavsia sezon khabariv u vuzakh [Bribe season opens in HEIs]," *UNIAN*, 13 June 2007. Retrieved 17 February 2007 from <http://www.unian.net/ukr/news/news-199511.html>.

sensitive to admissions-related corruption, on account of the two-tier admissions system, with free or state-funded places and tuition-paying ones. The new test is intended to eliminate bribes for securing the state-funded places. While this is a welcome initiative, numerous concerns have been raised about the validity of the test as a measure of future student performance. Cases of corruption continue to be reported and some institutions refuse to acknowledge the test, conducting parallel oral examinations or "interviews" to determine admission.

One of the factors behind the high level of corruption is the apparent complacency of those involved. Surveys have shown that close to 30% of students are inclined to use bribery as a way to improve grades, while a further 15% let friends know if such options exist.² While this leaves a substantial amount of non-cheating students, only 3–8%, depending on the region, stated that they would inform officials of incidents of bribery. The system is comfortable for many students, who either have jobs or simply don't care about their studies, leading some of them to lash out against corruption prevention hotlines, as they make bribery more difficult and expensive!

Although the bribes, extortion and embezzlement are the most visible facets of corruption in Ukraine, they are not the only and, arguably, not the most serious forms. More "covert" issues include various kinds of favoritism and plagiarism. Moreover, many state-owned HEI have vast possessions, often linked to campuses (but not only), making corrupt practices all the more lucrative. While the explicit corruption can be linked to poor oversight mechanisms,³ organizational problems, and financial and material shortages—which, to the government's merit, have been begun to be addressed with relative success—, they are not the most dangerous to higher education in Ukraine in the long term. Indeed, the intangible nature of the "covert" factors

makes them extremely hard to root out. They are pervasive and will compromise HEIs as partners in projects involving business, government, or other educational institutions.

Quality, not quantity

One of the astounding features of Ukraine's higher education is the growth in the number of institutions, particularly Level III and IV accredited HEIs, corresponding to academies, institutes and universities that can offer master, specialist and other postgraduate degrees, as opposed to Level I and II accredited HEIs, which can only offer junior specialist and bachelor diplomas. While the number of vocational schools is slowly rising after a post-independence decline,⁴ the number of Level I and II institutions has collapsed, falling from 742 in 1990 to 511 in 2008. The number of Level III and IV accredited HEIs has more than doubled, from 149 in 1990 to 350 in 2008. A significant part of this increase comes from level I and II institutions which gained higher levels of accreditation, though without always having made the necessary transformation in terms of quality and scope of education offered.

These shifts in the orientation of higher education in Ukraine have been mirrored by the changes in the student population. Thus, the fall in to Level I and II accredited establishments corresponded to a fall from 757,000 students in 1990 to just over 354,000 in 2008. Conversely, the number of students enrolled in Level III and IV HEIs exploded from 881,000 in 1990 to 2,245,000 in 2008. What is even more astounding is the rise in the number of postgraduate and doctoral students, which grew over the same period from 13,374 to 33,344.

The huge increases in Level III and IV institutions are far from as positive as they may seem at first glance. A significant proportion of those institutions, perhaps even the majority, are nothing more than diploma mills. As a result, their graduates often lack even the basic skills required by the job market while the ethos of bribery and shady connections continues to spread throughout Ukrainian society.

⁴ The number of students actually fell from 648,000 in 1991 to 436,000 in 2008.

² Ararat Osipian, Higher education corruption in Ukraine as reflected in nation's media, Munich Personal RePEc Archive, 2007. Retrieved on February 10, 2010, from <http://mpra.ub.uni-muenchen.de/8464/>

³ For example, punishment for fraud ranges from UAH 850 to two years in prison, though in practice only the minimum fine is issued.

Moreover, the staggering rise in the number of post-graduate students is due to pay-scales in public institutions, rather than a real need among different industries for highly qualified, specialized workers or people in a quest for knowledge. Thus Ukraine should scrutinize the quality of education provided, revoking the accreditations of those institutions that fail to live up to the required standards.

Under-achievers

Although rankings are always a controversial subject among academics and educational experts, they do provide at least a vague idea of how various institutions are faring. Of course, most rankings have internal biases towards larger, older, English-language institutions. Unfortunately, even when these factors are taken into account, Ukrainian HEIs continue to rank very low.

A factor even more evocative than the specific rankings obtained by Ukrainian HEIs is their absence from most rankings, such as the THE-QS, a heavily peer-review-based ranking indicative of an institution's prestige; the Shanghai ranking, a natural science-oriented academic measure; or the HEEACT, which assesses contributions to international research. The rankings in which Ukrainian HEIs do make a place are either of poor quality or include a very large number of institutions. The first category includes the Global University Ranking,⁵ which is strongly biased towards former soviet countries, especially Russia, with 3 institutions in the top 100 and an astonishing 5th place for Lomonosov University. It ranks as the top Ukrainian HEIs: Kharkiv Polytechnic (356), Donetsk National Technical University (409), and Donetsk National University (421).

A more reliable ranking is Webometrics,⁶ developed by the cybermetrics lab of the Spanish National Research Council. The ranking measures how connected a given HEI website is, based on the assumption

that "You are your website." It has the advantage of ranking over 8,000 institutions and rates Ukraine's podium thus: Taras Shevchenko University in Kyiv (1,346), Kyiv-Mohyla Academy (2,055), and Ivan Franko University in L'viv (2,099).

Another commonly-used way of assessing HEI effectiveness, although it is limited to technical and engineering institutions, is to observe activity around patent registration in a given country. On this account, Ukraine fairs better, with a total of 3,909 patents filed and 2,889 patent grants registered in 2008.⁷ While this is far from insignificant, it is below the number of patents filed by Belgium, Thailand or Denmark.

Nevertheless, it would be highly advisable to replace the necessity of relying on international rankings by creating rigorous home-grown ones. However, such rankings would have to be based on a transparent and academic methodology, unlike the Top 200 project which is a closed-door business, largely based on the size of an institution (leading Ostroh and Kyiv-Mohyla academies to pull out of it, despite habitually being placed at the top of the list). Proper rankings would provide all the parties involved with reliable feedback about the effectiveness of their endeavors.

Ukraine's Isolated HEIs: Still behind the Iron Curtain

One of the most deleterious features of Ukraine's system of higher education, inherited from the Soviet period, is its isolation, especially institutions devoted to social sciences. The emphasis on standardized curricula, not challenging official positions, and general lack of freedoms has led to a system cut off from the world. These features are particularly deplorable in academia, which requires openness and collaboration to function properly.

One of the notable aspects of the Bologna Process is the intent to foster cross-country cooperation

⁵ [http://www.globaluniversitiesranking.org/images/banners/top-400\(eng\).pdf](http://www.globaluniversitiesranking.org/images/banners/top-400(eng).pdf); [http://www.globaluniversitiesranking.org/images/banners/top-500\(eng\).pdf](http://www.globaluniversitiesranking.org/images/banners/top-500(eng).pdf)

⁶ http://www.webometrics.info/rank_by_country.asp?country=ua

⁷ Measured by country of origin, non-residents were responsible for 41% of these patents. See http://www.wipo.int/ipstats/en/statistics/patents/wipo_pub_931.html

among HEIs. This is an area in which Ukrainian HEIs stand out through their absence. Within the 20 or so groups to which top European HEIs are affiliated, including such prominent networks as the Coimbra Group—38 of the oldest and most prestigious European universities, some of which are younger than the Kyiv-Mohyla or Ostroh Academies—; the Utrecht Network, which is notably focused on internationalization through summer schools, mobility programs, and joint curricula and degrees; the League of European Research Universities; and Top Industrial Managers for Europe, which promotes student exchanges and double degrees, primarily for technical and engineering specialists, not a single Ukrainian HEI can be found. This even includes the Institutional Network of Universities from the Capitals of Europe, which includes an Albanian university, but no Ukrainian one.

Developing countries around the world are currently taking advantage of present trends for the outsourcing of education, as well as collaboration with business and private individuals. These can take the form of privately sponsored scholarships, endowments for private universities, corporate universities, joint programs, or off-shore campuses. Such programs are subject to greater pressures in terms of achieving specified goals and being accountable for the efficient use of resources, making them competitive in comparison to their public peers. Moreover, such programs also have a greater international component, which stimulates intellectual exchange, mobility, and spread of know-how.

One of the notable exceptions in international cooperation is Kyiv-Mohyla Academy's partnership with the Economics Education and Research Consortium, a collection of international donor organizations promoting economics education in the newly-independent states. Together with the Victor Pinchuk Foundation, it founded the Kyiv School of Economics. A joint program with the University of Houston, international faculty, and links to business and regional partners, as well as the combination of individual and business donors, have turned it into a

widely acknowledged center of excellence. Nevertheless, such collaboration is extremely rare.⁸

Business wants in

Despite the fact that Ukrainian HEIs are spewing out tremendous numbers of graduates and so-called specialists, employers are finding it hard to find professionals who match their requirements. Indeed, graduates produced by Ukrainian HEIs largely fail to acquire the skills required by potential employers, making diplomas irrelevant in comparison to previous work experience and, too often, connections or bribes.

One of the leading trends in global higher education in the past decade has been fostering ties between HEIs and business. Indeed, this has developed to the extent that corporations are becoming wary of universities' intellectual property rights. However, the strengthening of intellectual property rights has spurred academic innovation and growth—though some would argue that this has been at the cost of neglecting basic science.

One of the methods that has been successfully used in other countries to develop such ties is to create special activity areas linked up to top institutions. These can take the form of technology parks, science parks or special economic zones. Businesses receive preferential treatment in exchange for supporting HEIs or activities in desired areas, requiring cooperation with HEI. This is also a way of attracting outsourcing, which tends to rely heavily on a region's pool of post-secondary students. This has already started to develop around L'viv and Kharkiv, where Microsoft Ukraine plans to open an

⁸ Other cases of individual institutions collaborating internationally are far less laudable. A notable example is the Inter-Regional Academy of Personnel Management, which was incidentally involved in an embezzlement scandal and which offers US-accredited PhDs in Psychology in collaboration with a notorious—and since evicted—diploma mill based in Honolulu, Hawaii. "Byvshy rector luhanskoho filiala MAUP prisvoila 831,9 tysyach hryven [Former MAUP Luhansk campus rector absconded with UAH 831,900]," CityNews, 25 December 2006. Retrieved 17 February 2010 from http://www.citynews.net.ua/5/8925_1.html.

Innovation Center together with Kharkiv University in 2010, the second in the country.⁹

Finally, corporate universities are a means of educating a pool of graduate students with specific business-oriented skill sets. However, problems with capturing the full benefits of maintaining such an institution when graduates tend to change employment after initially working for the company means that setting up corporate universities requires public support.

Notably, the lack of cooperation in this field can be largely attributed to the unwillingness of HEIs. Companies regularly complain about the imposition of fees and administrative hurdles, which are often used by HEI governance in order to solicit bribes. Many HEIs charge companies for advertising about employment or internship openings or for hosting career fairs. Overall links between business and a significant portion of HEIs remain characterized by distrust rather than cooperation, leading to deficiencies in human capital supply and hampering the development of applied research.

More than lip-service?

Ukraine officially committed itself to the Bologna Process at the Bergen conference, which was held in 2005 and dedicated to expanding the process. While this can be seen as an aspect of Ukraine's planned *Europeanization*, it is important to keep in mind that the process was initiated within the framework of the Council of Europe, together with members of the European UNESCO region, and is thus not directly related to EU integration. Nevertheless, the European Commission is an important actor contributing to the process, notably through the Erasmus and Life-long Learning Programs.

One of the most important challenges linked to the Bologna Process—indeed its *raison d'être*—is to bring the structures of higher education in line with established European standards. This criterion has been partly fulfilled, with Level III and IV institutions such as universities, academies and institutes

⁹ The first such center was opened in collaboration with Taras Shevchenko University.

embracing the two-cycle system.¹⁰ The European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) was implemented at Level III and IV HEIs during the 2006/2007 academic year. This year has been set as the deadline for the implementation of the National Qualifications Framework, and institutions of Quality Assurance are operating, at the internal, external, state, and regional levels.

While it may seem that the Bologna Process is being successfully implemented, there are plenty of inconsistencies. Many HEIs continue to run parallel curricula or ones that are incongruous with European standards, considerably reducing the transferability of credits. Quality assurance often does not conform to European norms, either. Doctoral studies have yet to be reformed. Moreover, staff mobility is still strongly limited, largely by the right of a rector to prohibit teachers from holding more than one position and the lack of inter-university bilateral agreements on staff exchange and joint professional development programs.

A commonly overlooked element of the Bologna Process is the question of student participation. This is extremely important, as students constitute the main group with an interest in improving the level of educational services provided. Thus, in a system dominated by inertia, student groups can provide the kick-start to reform. However, the independence and scope of these bodies remains constrained in Ukraine—and not just here. For example, rectors continue to nominate student representatives, student representatives are constricted to low-profile advisory activities, and financial barriers significantly limit the scope of their work. A further problem is that, due to the young age and lack of financial independence of students, it is in fact their parents that ought to be involved in matters of quality assurance — generating a whole new set of complications.

Taking the baloney out of Bologna

The Bologna Process is in many senses idolized as a means of *Europeanizing* Ukraine's system of higher

¹⁰ Doctoral studies have not yet been transformed

education. However, it is not a miracle solution for all woes. Moreover, since the beginning of its implementation in many European countries, assessments of consequences have been disappointing.

One of the main failures is quality assurance,¹¹ an important commitment made at the Bergen conference. Indeed, a total of 16 countries, including France, Italy, Austria and Ukraine, were assessed as being non-compliant with regard to internal and external quality assurance and having a properly functioning quality assurance agency. Only five are considered compliant with the European Standards and Guidelines (developed within the framework of the Bologna Process). Unsurprisingly, none of the countries involved have seen significant improvements in the decade since the beginning of the process, as assessed by external experts.

The effect on student participation is limited, with only 30% of students stating that the process has had a significant or better effect: 39% claimed it had a little effect, while 15% claimed it had either no effect at all and 9% said it actually led to a deterioration in participation.¹² Moreover, student participation is low in regards to both internal and external evaluation, which is particularly important in the former case, as students are the main consumers of educational products.

Despite promises of widespread implementation of the three-cycle system and ECTS, many countries maintain parallel systems, especially in non-university HEIs. Consequently, a system intended to recoup European competitiveness in higher education has been largely limited to cosmetic changes and half-hearted reforms. This is clearly mirrored in the continued stagnation of a majority of European institutions, in particular when compared with the rising stars of Asia and Australia.

¹¹ The European Students Union. Bologna With Student's Eyes 2009. Retrieved on March 24, 2010, from http://esu-online.org/documents/publications/official_publications/BWSE2009-final.pdf

¹² The European Students Union. Bologna With Student's Eyes 2009. Retrieved on March 24, 2010, from http://esu-online.org/documents/publications/official_publications/BWSE2009-final.pdf

Student Mobility: Threat to status quo or opportunity?

Despite the generally disheartening situation, in one area the Bologna Process has proven to be a success: student mobility. The existence of comparable curricula, the ECTS, and various exchange programs, has led to a rise in student exchanges, prompting the coining of the term "Erasmus Generation" for the new generation of European students with broad international experience. Although Ukraine recently joined the Erasmus Mundus External Co-operations Window, through the European Neighborhood Partnership Instrument, it has yet to reap benefits.

Foreign-funded scholarships continue to be a rarity for Ukrainian students. Ukrainian students benefited from 135 Erasmus-type scholarships across all categories, while Turkish students received in excess of 7,000.¹³ As international experience is a significant factor in the spread of new ideas and values, the importance of this aspect should not be underestimated. Key problems mentioned by students include difficulties with transferring credits, mainly due to recognition issues, administrative hurdles, and the poor portability of loans and grants.

In a sense, Ukraine's HEIs benefit from the visa restrictions imposed upon Ukrainian citizens, as well as from a variety of factors—historical, linguistic, financial, cultural and so on—that have led to the isolation of Ukrainian students. Indeed, should these hurdles be removed, HEIs in Ukraine will face much higher levels of competition and corruption will likely wither. Top students will vote with their feet. This is a serious threat for Ukraine, from both a social and commercial point-of-view. Those top students are the ones most likely to be potential drivers of growth and public figures. Educated abroad, meager perspectives back home mean they are likely to stay away. Considering Ukraine's demographic crisis, such a situation is quite unsustainable and could eventually lead to a collapse of higher education in Ukraine.

¹³ Zarembo Kateryna, Shumylo Olha, Curing Ukraine Fatigue: A generation change, ICPS Policy Brief, Kyiv, December 2009.

Moving from barely adequate to satisfactory

In order to address the many problems, efforts must be made both by HEIs and the government, both jointly and independently. A well-functioning system of higher education is a requisite to transforming Ukraine's industrial relics, making its agriculture competitive, and developing a full-fledged service sector. Ukraine has immense potential, notably from the myriads of engineering and technical students, who can help develop high-tech industries. This means that six key issues must be addressed:

- HEIs must stop setting up barriers to cooperation with business. They must organize fairs, engage local industry, work on joint projects, and seek corporate sponsorship. This is fundamental, to keep higher education in touch with reality. In order to encourage such links, the government should create special economic zones and technology parks offering favorable conditions for such joint ventures. Business formulate their expectations, towards both government and HEIs, in a clear and united manner.
- HEIs must work to integrate into European and global research and cooperation networks, using them to acquire know-how and increase both staff and student mobility.
- HEIs need a framework for international mobility: the government should have a policy of attracting foreign institutions, be it in the form of joint campuses, foreign accredited institutions, or other. Even medium-level institutions attracted by tax breaks could provide a breath of fresh air in Ukraine's stuffy higher education system.
- Government and HEIs alike need to foster international student exchange programs. This should be done by direct cooperation with foreign institutions, as well as efforts at the government level.
- HEIs must tackle the question of corruption head-on. This could mean abolishing state-fund-

ed placements at HEIs altogether, but it would make HEIs directly accountable to their customers. Diploma mills should be tracked down and their accreditation revoked.

- The government and HEIs in Ukraine should pursue the Bologna Process with specific attention accorded to improving student participation, quality assurance and mobility.

In short, Ukraine's HEIs must make an effort to collaborate with other institutions abroad. This is the only way to finally bring Ukraine out of its isolation and make its schools more competitive. Ukraine has to make up for decades of intellectual isolation and come up to date with developments in global academia. This cannot be done without engaging researchers and institutions from abroad. The Bologna Process is likely to be of considerable assistance in this area, but it is not enough to integrate Ukraine's higher education with global networks. Moreover, the experience of other European countries shows that implementing the Bologna Process does not necessarily increase competitiveness. One thing that must be kept in mind is that it is not necessary to improve a large number of HEIs. Indeed, the most important thing for the long-term health of higher education in Ukraine is that a sizeable group of very good institutions set the standards for the rest of the country — a Ukrainian Ivy League so to speak.

The government for its part needs to provide a clear legal and organizational framework for international mobile HEIs, rather than manifesting its traditional distrust of foreign actors. US-licensed universities, such as those in Armenia, Bulgaria and Hungary, have proved to be small but active centers of excellence that foster competition and networking and develop specialists who are in high demand. National education policy should take advantage of the current trend towards outsourcing education and provide a framework for offshore programs and institutional franchises. While setting up international branch campuses is likely to lead to a certain stratification of higher education—attracting top academics with better conditions and pay—, this should foster competition and raise standards across the board.

One of the most radical but potentially very effective propositions is to abolish state-owned higher education. This could be replaced by a series of merit-based grants and scholarships. The belief that state-owned and state-funded education "levels the playing field" is based on several fallacies. Education is never free, as it requires the sacrifice of time which could otherwise be spent working. Thus, a certain level of individual wealth is necessary to enjoy state-funded education. Moreover, fee-paying students (or their parents) will hold their institutions accountable and provide the impetus for change. Thus, such a change would reduce the number of students—along with demand for bogus diplomas—, increase competition among HEIs, and increase the financial means of the fittest by allowing them to provide better services.

Although the present circumstances make it challenging, one possible strategy involves devoting a considerable part of the education budget towards providing scholarships that allow highly gifted indi-

viduals to study at top institutions around the world, with the promise of specialist positions in government. Such a strategy is widely viewed as one of the foundations of the successful transformation of South Korea,¹⁴ which went from being a poor agrarian society with fledgling national elites to being one of the Asia's economic and cultural powerhouses.

As to long-term development, the transformation of Ukraine's higher education system is one of the greatest challenges facing the country. It will determine the ability of Ukraine's economy to finally rid itself from its undesirable heritage and enter the 21st century. While the Bologna Process can facilitate this transformation, by itself it will be insufficient. Excessive focus on emulating mediocre European solutions will not improve Ukraine's situation. Most importantly, students, the main consumers of educational services, should be empowered and engaged in the process. The country needs a comprehensive policy in order to open up its doors. The pressure to do so is certainly rising.

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¹⁴ And is currently being applied in China.