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ENGAGING STAKEHOLDERS IN ORDER TO INCREASE THE QUALITY OF THE AGRICULTURAL HIGHER EDUCATION – CURRENT STATE AND DIRECTIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT

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Abstract. The main objectives of the research were to assess the stakeholder engagement in ensuring the quality of agricultural higher education in the Republic of Moldova, to identify related problems and, on this basis, to propose directions to address them. In order to achieve these objectives, the following research tools were used: the synthesis of conceptual approaches to stakeholder engagement in educational activities; the thematic structured interview; generalization; deduction; formulation of reasoning and conclusions. The investigation resulted in identifying and specifying deficiencies in cooperation with stakeholders in agricultural higher education in the Republic of Moldova and making proposals of directions to increase its effectiveness. The research was carried out within the project “Predictive approaches to increasing the quality of skills in agricultural higher education based on the partnership with the business environment”, No. 20.80009.0807.41, contracting authority - National Agency for Research and Development.

Key words: Agricultural higher education; Authentic engagement; Stakeholder engagement; Republic of Moldova.

INTRODUCTION

The need to involve different categories of beneficiaries in the processes related to ensuring an adequate quality of the vocational education offer is no longer something new and unusual. At the same time, even if the significant role of the beneficiaries in ensuring the competitiveness and, implicitly, the sustainability of vocational education institutions is widely recognized (Mainardes, E. et al. 2013; Pearce, L., 2003; Tam, F., 2007; Trustum, L., Wee, S. 2007; Weaver, T. 1976; Williams, J. 2002), we identified some deficiencies in using beneficiaries to continuously improve agricultural vocational education programs in the Republic of Moldova. This reasoning is based on the following arguments:

- the persistence of a substantial gap between the skills held by graduates and those required by employers (Prisacaru, V. et al. 2019);

- the insufficient quality of the dialogue between vocational education institutions and the representatives of the business environment (Prisacaru, V., Caradja, A. 2017; Prisacaru, V. et al. 2019).

Thus, even if certain actions are implemented in order to establish relations with the beneficiaries, there are problems related to the quality of the dialogue with them and, respectively, the results of the dialogue are far from those expected. In this context, we can quote the famous Steve Jobs: „Design is not just what it looks like and feels like. Design is how it works” (Acland, A. 2012, p. 6).

An initial stage in the process of finding solutions to the problem mentioned above would be to try to find out what we really expect to gain from the beneficiaries of the educational institution or, more precisely, what quality of their involvement is aspired to. Stakeholder engagement is defined in the Handbook of Public & Stakeholder Engagement as „...an umbrella term to describe any process that involves contact with the public, from providing information to running formal consultation processes” (Acland, A. 2012, p. 7). In an attempt to conceptualize the process of stakeholder engagement in the quality assurance process of the higher education, Bollaert and Delplace (2021) identified four stages of it (Figure 1).

By examining the content of the stakeholder engagement stages set out in Figure 1, it is clear that each subsequent stage is more consistent and requires a better quality of activities, the latter involving an optimal use of the beneficiaries’ potential. In this context, we will refer repeatedly to the Handbook of Public & Stakeholder Engagement where, along with the engagement, the concepts of consultation and participation are presented. Thus, the consultation is defined as a concept used to elucidate the formal and structured processes through which citizens and stakeholders can comment on and make contributions to the decisions and policies affecting them. The participation of stakeholders indicates a deeper involvement, through several stages, in which they have some control of the process, the agenda, and the decisions, and the results are more transparent (Acland, A. 2012, p.7).

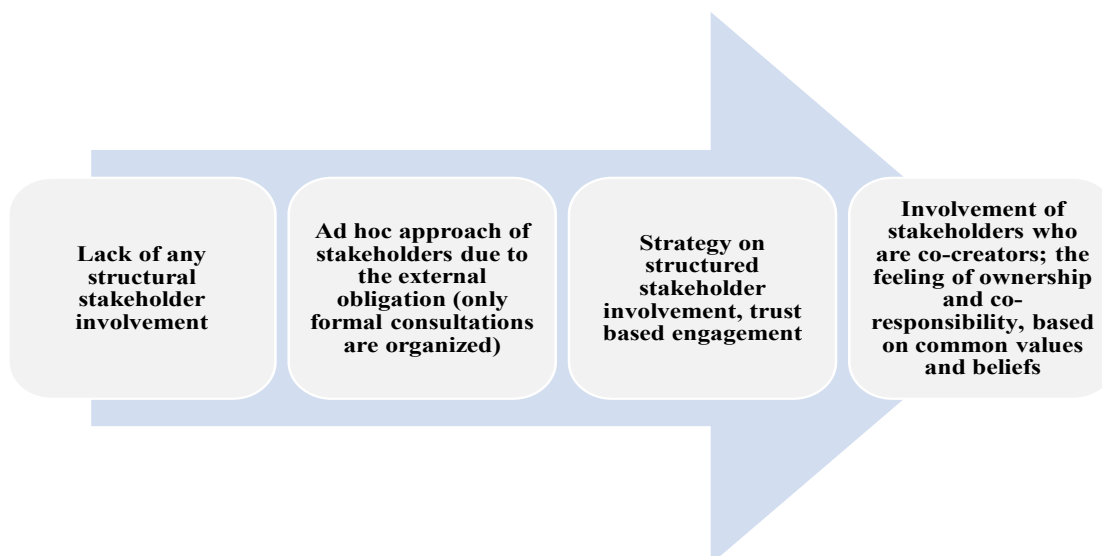


Figure 1. *The stakeholder engagement stages*

Source: (Bollaert and Delplace, 2021, p. 26)

Making a generalization of the above, we deduce that if consultation represents a level of engagement to which certain contributions are obtained from stakeholders within their areas of interest, participation is a higher level of engagement, a stage where values and responsibilities are shared. In this context, we can highlight with certainty the participation as that qualifier of the engagement, towards which any vocational education institution must aspire.

According to the Handbook of Public & Stakeholder Engagement, an authentic stakeholder engagement is based on the following principles: inclusiveness; transparency, openness and clarity; commitment; accessibility; accountability; responsiveness; willingness to learn; productivity (Acland, A., 2012). A more detailed description of these principles is set out in Table 1.

Table 1. *Principles of authentic engagement*

List of principles	Specification of principles
<i>Inclusiveness</i>	A comprehensive involvement of all stakeholders, having an interest in or being affected by a specific decision, including groups difficult to reach (such as young people, minorities, and socially mobile professionals).
<i>Transparency, openness and clarity</i>	Ensuring access and transparency of information for all stakeholders, as well as identifying and explaining where information lacks, which are the uncertainties, what can or not be influenced by engagement and which are the next steps.
<i>Commitment</i>	Showing respect for both stakeholders and taxpayers by directing priorities and resources towards engagement, as well as by highlighting the significance of different opinions, even if they are sometimes different.
<i>Accessibility</i>	Providing different ways for parts to be engaged, ensuring that there are not any barriers of language, culture or opportunity.
<i>Accountability</i>	Providing prompt and unambiguous feedback of how and why their contributions have (or have not) influenced the outcome, accomplishing completely the reporting on final decisions, strategies and/or implementation plans.
<i>Responsiveness</i>	The flexibility of consultants in the continuous improvement of existing ideas. The perception by those consulted that they can come with contributions to improve the things.
<i>Willingness to learn</i>	Encouraging both parties (the engagers and the engaged) to interactive and incremental learning, based on mutual understanding, respect and relationship.
<i>Productivity</i>	Establishing from the outset of the expected improvements.

Source: adapted by the author based on A. Acland (2012, p.12)

Through a deeper examination of the principles mentioned in Figure 1, we can systematize them into two groups:

1. general, organizational principles aimed at organizing the process of cooperation with stakeholders starting with the initial phase of engagement: inclusiveness; transparency, openness and clarity; accessibility; productivity;

2. procedural principles that determine the quality of communication with stakeholders in collaboration processes: commitment; accountability; responsiveness; willingness to learn.

At the same time, it is obvious and indisputable that only by respecting all the principles, the maximum effects of the cooperation with stakeholders can be obtained.

The extent to which each of the above-mentioned principles is respected depends largely on the quality of stakeholder relations management. Managers, in their turn, should adopt an appropriate, productive behavior in this regard, based on a set of principles (Szwajkowski, E., 2000):

Understanding and taking into consideration the demands of all stakeholders in the decision-making process;

Identifying, through communication, stakeholders' demands, contributions and risks taken on in the relationship with the organization;

Adopting the behaviors in accordance with the needs and capacities of each stakeholder;

Recognizing the interdependence with stakeholders, fairly distributing the benefits, taking into consideration the prevailing risks and vulnerabilities;

Cooperating with other public and private institutions in order to minimize the risks inherent to company activities;

Avoiding actions able to harm or jeopardize the citizens.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

In order to achieve the proposed objectives, the following research methods were used: the synthesis of theoretical approaches to stakeholder engagement in educational activities; conducting a structured thematic interview on a sample of 103 representatives of the management team and teaching staff of the State Agrarian University of Moldova (the only higher agricultural education institution in the country); analysis; deduction; formulation of reasonings and conclusions.

A series of existing studies on the researched subject served as information sources, as well as the primary data obtained during the interview, which, after being processed, allowed to evaluate the quality of communication with stakeholders within the State Agrarian University and to come up with certain recommendations to improve it.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Having as theoretical landmarks the requirements for an authentic stakeholder engagement, a diagnosis of the cooperation of the State Agrarian University of Moldova with its stakeholders was carried out. For this purpose, the results of a thematic structured interview on a sample of 103 people were used. The sample consisted of 31 representatives of the management team (16 people from the university top management, 8 representatives of the faculty management and 7 heads of departments) and 72 representatives of the teaching staff. The questions included in the thematic interview form were focused on the following aspects:

a) correctness of perception of the beneficiaries by the higher agricultural education providers;

b) the extent to which the principles of the authentic stakeholder engagement are followed by them.

Having processed the interview results, there have been identified the following positive aspects related to the cooperation of the educational institution with the internal and external stakeholders:

a) the awareness of the stakeholder engagement benefits by the representatives of the management team;

b) respondents' awareness of the possible activities to be carried out through cooperation with the stakeholders, as well as of their applicative valences;

c) most respondents highlighted the more and more active involvement of employers among the external stakeholders in cooperation activities in the last period.

At the same time, a series of problems were identified, being related to the perception of stakeholders' value for the continuous increase of vocational education quality, as well as to insufficient stakeholder commitment in the activities of educational institution. A detailed presentation of them is shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Interpretation of the thematic structured interview results

General findings	Arguments in favor of the findings made	Expected consequences of the problems identified
Assessing the quality of stakeholder perception		
Not all stakeholders of the institution are known	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Insufficient knowledge of the stakeholders' basic features by 66% of respondents and, respectively, incomplete nomination of institutional stakeholders. 	<p>Erroneous identification of stakeholders, as well as their wrong prioritization is the first indicator of the low quality of the stakeholder engagement in institution's activities, which allows to deduce the non-compliance with such principles of the authentic engagement, as: inclusiveness, transparency, openness and clarity.</p> <p>The disregard of some important stakeholders denotes the ignorance of their role in ensuring the quality and sustainability of study programs - this is also an indicator of the non-compliance with the principle of productivity (the forecast of the expected results being, implicitly, ignored).</p>
The value of some stakeholders is misperceived	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Disregarding students as internal stakeholders by 7% of respondents and omitting some important external stakeholders by 78% of respondents; • Wrong prioritization of the university administration among internal stakeholders by 30% of respondents; • Incorrect prioritization of the relevant ministry among external stakeholders by 21% of respondents. 	
Assessing the effectiveness of the relationships with stakeholders		
While the managerial staff participates more actively in various cooperation activities with stakeholders, the teaching staff is less involved in such activities.	<p>Confirmation about involvement in various cooperation activities with stakeholders by 77% of the representatives of the management team and only by 45% of the representatives of the ordinary teaching staff;</p> <p>Inability of 15% of respondents representing teaching staff to assess the quality of cooperation with stakeholders.</p>	<p>Insufficient involvement of the teaching staff substantially diminishes the potential of cooperation activities with stakeholders in increasing the quality of the educational process. Implicitly, there can be repeatedly confirmed the ignorance of the inclusiveness principle, but also of the commitment principle of the authentic engagement.</p> <p>The omission of the increased quality of the programs among the potential benefits of cooperation with stakeholders is one more evidence of non-compliance with the principle of productivity.</p>
The number of activities carried out through cooperation with stakeholders is low	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Only 36% of respondents indicated a larger number of cooperation activities 	<p>Both the small number and the low quality of activities carried out through cooperation with stakeholders represent a clear indicator of the insufficient capitalization of their potential in increasing the quality of study programmes.</p> <p>Insufficient involvement of employers creates impediments in linking the content of study programmes to the needs of the labor market. Ignoring students as internal beneficiaries of the educational offer has several negative consequences:</p> <p>loss of the opportunity to receive suggestions from students on increasing the quality of the educational process;</p> <p>their lower motivation for high academic performance;</p> <p>„removing” students from the values of the institution, insufficient framework for their commitment to the objectives and mission of the university etc.</p> <p>The above mentioned is evidence of non-compliance with the procedural principles of authentic engagement: commitment; accountability; responsiveness; willingness to learn.</p>
The quality of cooperation with stakeholders is low.	<p>Only 54% of respondents estimated the quality of cooperation with employers with the rating “good”;</p> <p>Only 10% of the representatives of the teaching staff mentioned the increase of the quality of study programmes among the cooperation benefits;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All respondents did not indicate students among those with whom cooperation is carried out at a high level. 	

Source: developed by the author

By generalizing the above mentioned, we can conclude that the cooperation activities with stakeholders carried out by the State Agrarian University correspond, in terms of content and quality, to the second stage, according to the approach of Bollaert and Delplace „Ad hoc approach of stakeholders due to the external obligation” (Bollaert, L. and Deplace, S., 2021, p.26). Implicitly, we found out that in the related activities, the principles of authentic engagement set out above are often ignored. Moreover, non-compliance with some principles triggers negative chain effects on others, as shown in Figure 2.

As remedies for the problems identified above, we could suggest the following:

More active and wider promotion of knowledge and good practices regarding stakeholders’ engagement in educational activities;

Creating and continuously consolidating the culture of effective communication with stakeholders as an indispensable component of the organizational culture of the State Agrarian University of Moldova;

Transforming cooperation with stakeholders into a basic operational element of the institution’s quality management system;

Equal involvement of managerial and teaching staff in cooperation activities with stakeholders.

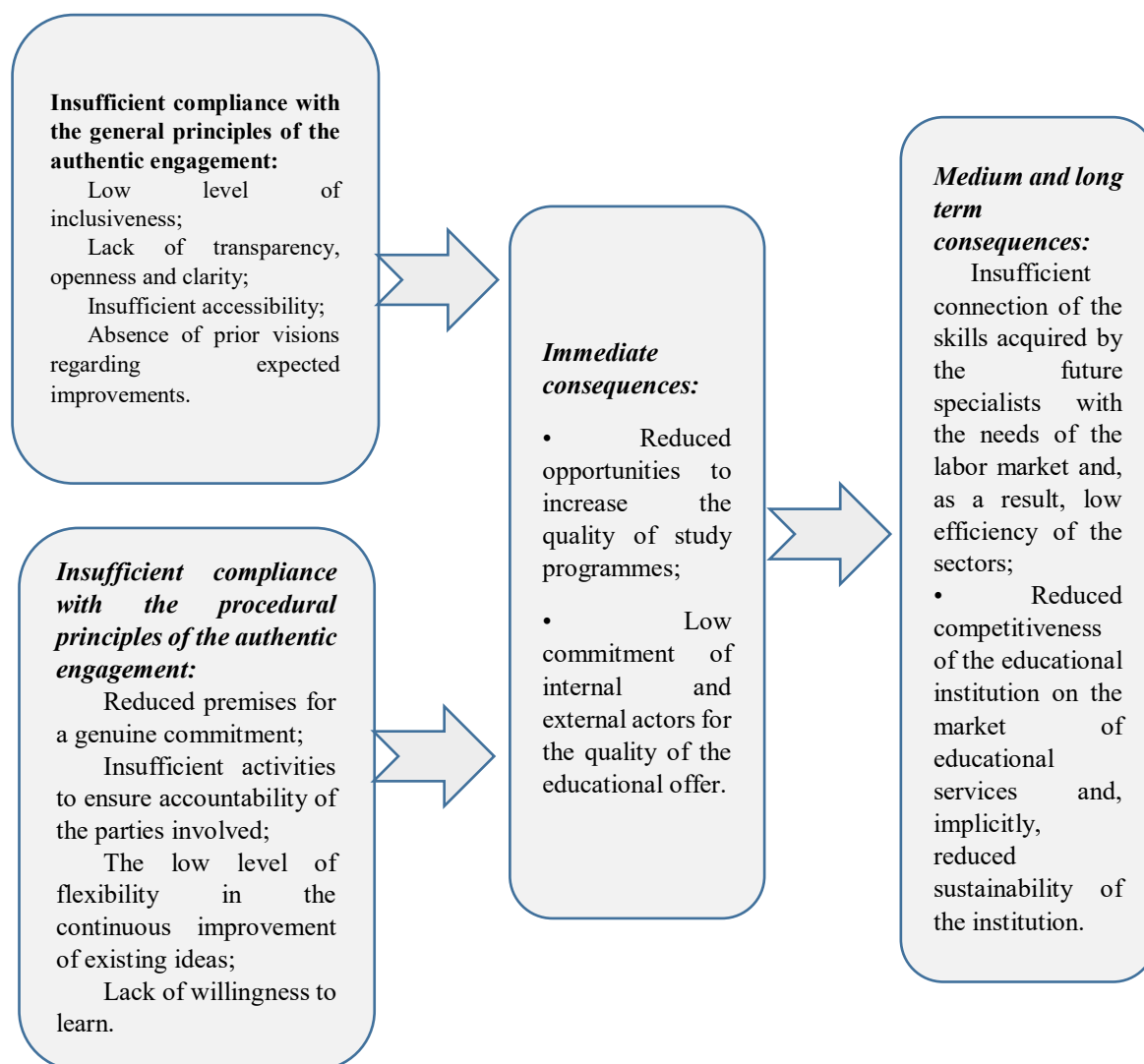


Figure 2. Problems and consequences of non-compliance of the State Agrarian University of Moldova with the principles of the authentic stakeholder engagement

Source: developed by the author

CONCLUSIONS

- Despite the increasing recognition of the significance of stakeholders in ensuring the quality of agricultural study programmes, the stakeholder engagement by the State Agrarian University of Moldova corresponds, in terms of content and quality, only to the second stage, being based on an ad hoc approach;
- The low level as well as low quality of cooperation with stakeholders is largely due to the non-compliance of the institution with the principles of authentic stakeholder engagement;
- The non-compliance with the principles of authentic stakeholder engagement has immediate effects: reduced opportunities to increase the quality of study programmes; low commitment of internal and external actors to increase the quality of the educational offer, and consequently through medium and long term effects, leading to insufficient connection of skills acquired by the future specialists with the needs of the labor market; reduced competitiveness of the educational institution on the market of educational services and, implicitly, reduced sustainability of the institution.

In order to remedy the discovered problems, the first step is to model a more effective system of relations with internal and external stakeholders, based on the exact compliance with the principles of authentic stakeholder engagement. There is also a need for such actions as: more active and wider promotion of knowledge and good practices regarding the stakeholder engagement in educational activities; creating and continuously consolidating the culture of effective communication with stakeholders; organic insertion of the cooperation with stakeholders into the institution's quality management system; transforming teaching staff into active actors of the cooperation activities with stakeholders.

Only in this way, the cooperation with stakeholders can grow and evolve in a qualitatively superior form of participation, based on the sharing of values and responsibilities by all participants.

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