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THE IMPACT OF AGRICULTURAL EDUCATION SYSTEM ON THE IMPROVEMENT OF THE RURAL LABOUR MARKET SITUATION

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Abstract

The main propose of this article was to reveal the persistent dependence between the value of agricultural education and rural labour market indicators. The rural labour market investigations denoted negative trends of young people employment. One of the rural labour market greatest problems is the lack of attractiveness for well-qualified young people. Along with other factors, agricultural education represents an effective tool to improve the labour market situation in the rural space. According to the employers' questionnaires, there are some problems related to young people ability to integrate their theoretical knowledge in practical contexts. Another problem concerns the low level of knowledge and lack of practical skills in starting up a business. These conclusions emphasized the necessity of curriculum improvement in the higher education system, modernization of the educational technology and establishment of effective collaborations with enterprises.

Key words*: agricultural education, knowledge, labour market, practical skills, young people evolution.*

INTRODUCTION

Achieving the objective of sustainable economic and social development in the Republic of Moldova is not possible without a very thorough and multilateral approach of the professional education system in close correlation with the economic system of the country. It cannot be ignored that higher education institutions of the Republic of Moldova are permanently subject to very strict assessment, which estimates the quality of performed duties: education, science, extension. Implicitly, the academic and academic-scientific staff of those institutions is regularly evaluated according to quite severe criteria.

The purpose of studies, in its turn, is expressed in knowledge and skills, which are assessed during the intermediary and final evaluations according to different forms.

Apparently, the monitoring of the vocational education system is performed continuously and it is very severe. The dilemma is: why, despite of continuous efforts to modernize the curricula, increase the professionalism of the academic and academic-scientific staff, improve the educational technologies, etc., the level of economic and social development of the country is still very low? The answer is simple: the education system must be a business oriented one, flexible to any change in its environment and capable of providing that product, which is required by the business environment. Implicitly, the value of graduates' knowledge should be estimated in terms of its effects on business performance and, as a result and on the labour market indicators.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

As a material for this investigation the authors used some data presented in previous studies on the labour market in rural areas and, especially, on the youth employment [3],[4],[5], statistical data related to the dynamics of bachelor's and master's degree graduates in „Agricultural Sciences" and „Veterinary Medicine" in the Republic of Moldova in the period 2007-2013 and also related to the obtained agricultural products per person employed in the period 2007-2013, and also the conceptual approaches of the notion of knowledge.

The used methodological tools included: analysis, systematization, generalization, formulation of authors' conclusions and

judgments on the problems related to knowledge valorization by the graduates of agricultural specialties and the interaction of universities with the business environment.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Conceptual elucidation of the vocational education value can be achieved starting from the concept of value of knowledge.

By synthesizing several approaches we found out that knowledge is a familiarity, awareness, and understanding of someone or something, such as facts, information, description or skills, which is acquired through experience or education by perceiving, discovering or learning. Thus we conclude that by knowledge we cannot designate only the perceived and memorized information, but also the ability of implementing it into practice. This is clearly confirmed by other definitions of knowledge: "knowledge is generally thought of as being "know how", applied information, information with judgement or the capacity for effective action" [2]; knowledge is information transformed into capabilities for effective action. In effect, knowledge is action" [1].

Thus we could state that the value of knowledge is estimated by its impact on the activity where applicable, by the added value that it can generate. Therefore, the value is not an intrinsic property of knowledge, the value of knowledge depends entirely on how it is used. In this context we note that vocational education supposes the acquisition by future specialists of a certain volume of knowledge and practical skills constituting the potential that the educational institution graduates bring when taking their first steps into work. We could also identify them as the value of knowledge provided by the institution which, in its turn, often mistakenly addresses, being associated with graduates' success. In fact, it is not so important how we evaluate, but *why we choose to evaluate in a way or in another*? A thoughtful evaluation mechanism would allow each educational institution to get oriented to certain purposes and to take actions in order to achieve those purposes. And if we refer to vocational education institutions including universities, it is clear that the estimation of knowledge value should be carried out through its impact on the business environment, this impact mediating ultimately the influence on the labour market indicators. This statement is confirmed by the following: the impact on business is done by graduates' employment in the given environment. Therefore, they fall among the persons employed in a segment or another of the labour market, which implies some influence on the quantitative, structural and quality indicators of the labour market.

In order to justify the above mentioned statements, it is sufficient to try to find an answer to the following question: why do we have so many graduates with high average scores but the level of economic and social development of the country is so low? The problem is even worse if we consider the rural areas. Thus, under conditions when higher education institutions annually have numerous promotions of specialists, the employment of young people with higher education degrees in rural areas is done very slowly. Simultaneously, considering that the graduates of agricultural specialties are the ones who should manage the agricultural businesses which are prevalent in rural areas, we find an insufficient level of development there. Finally, the macroeconomic indicators reflecting the effectiveness of human resource management in rural areas are extremely low.

In order to support the above-mentioned statements, we shall refer to a number of indicators reflecting the changes on the labour market in the rural areas of the Republic of Moldova in the period 2007-2013 in relation to the dynamics of bachelor's and master's degree graduates in the fields related to agriculture: „Agricultural Sciences" and „Veterinary Medicine".

By examining the dynamics of the number of graduates of the specialties mentioned above (Fig.1), we observed a visible ascending indicator in recent years (2011-2013).

As a result, the number of graduates in 2013 is higher than in 2007 by 43%. At the same time, if we examine the dynamics of the number of graduates with higher education under the age of 34 years employed in

agriculture [6], we find that their share in the total number of specialists with higher education, even following a growing trend, remains at a very low level, being only 32% in 2013.

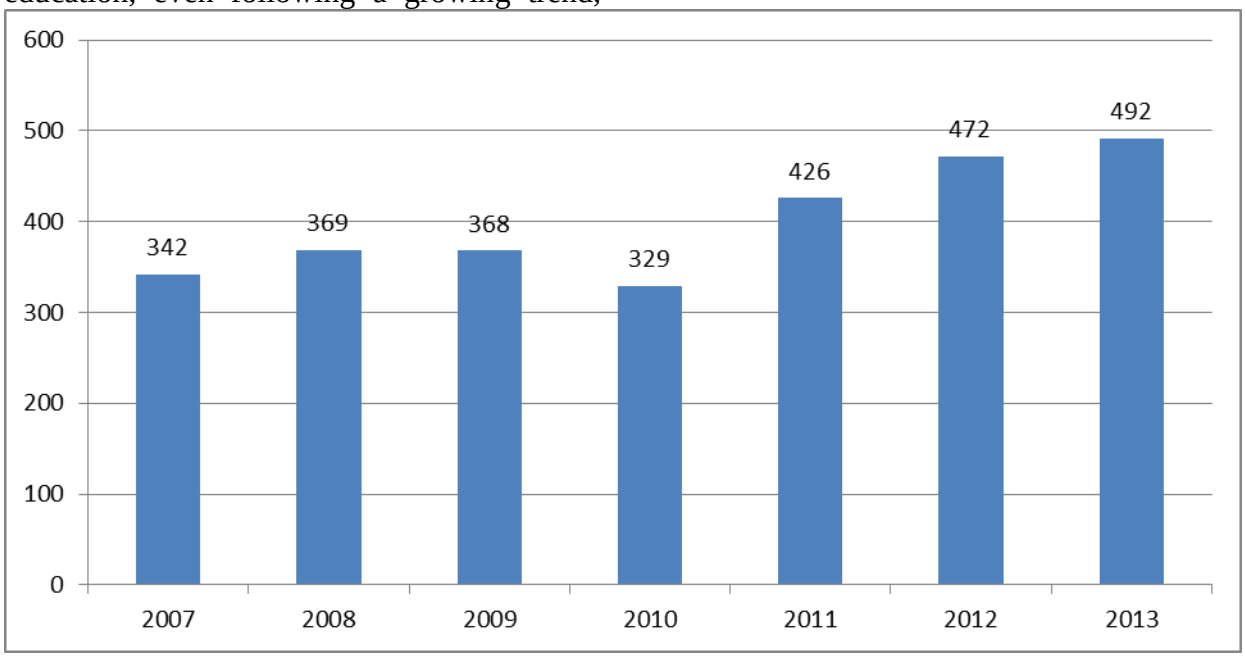

Fig. 1. Dynamics of the bachelor's and master's degree graduates in the fields of „Agricultural Sciences" and „Veterinary Medicine" in the Republic of Moldova in the period 2007-2013

Therefore, 68% of the total number of specialists with higher education employed in agricultural activities is aged over 35 years, which confirms the conclusions of a series other studies on the attractiveness of this branch for young graduates of higher education institutions specialized in agriculture [3], [4], [5].

Another important indicator of the workforce management is the obtained agricultural production from an employed person (Fig. 2).

According to Figure 2, we could see an important increase in the value of agricultural production obtained from a person employed in agriculture during the considered period. But if we refer to the actual size of the obtained indicators, we realize that it remains at a very low level. For example, in 2013, the average annual salary of an employee working in the field of „information and communication" was 88 653 MDL, and in the field of „finance and insurance" - 84 195 MDL. Therefore, we can conclude that even the salaries obtained in the mentioned fields exceed labour productivity in agriculture by 4.36 and 4.14 times respectively.

This is already an argument supporting the statement that the income in the field of agriculture is very low and, along with low salaries, it cannot motivate the young graduates to get employed into the branch. On the other hand, the prosperity of agricultural production and hence, of the rural areas, cannot be achieved without the involvement of the human factor in increasing the efficiency of the economic activities management. We conclude, therefore, that there is a vicious cycle that generates the following dilemma: what is to be done to solve the problem of rural areas? What are the main decision making factors that may arise in this issue in order to attract young professionals in rural areas and optimally exploit their potential? The deeper investigation of this topic highlights the necessity for a series of actions.

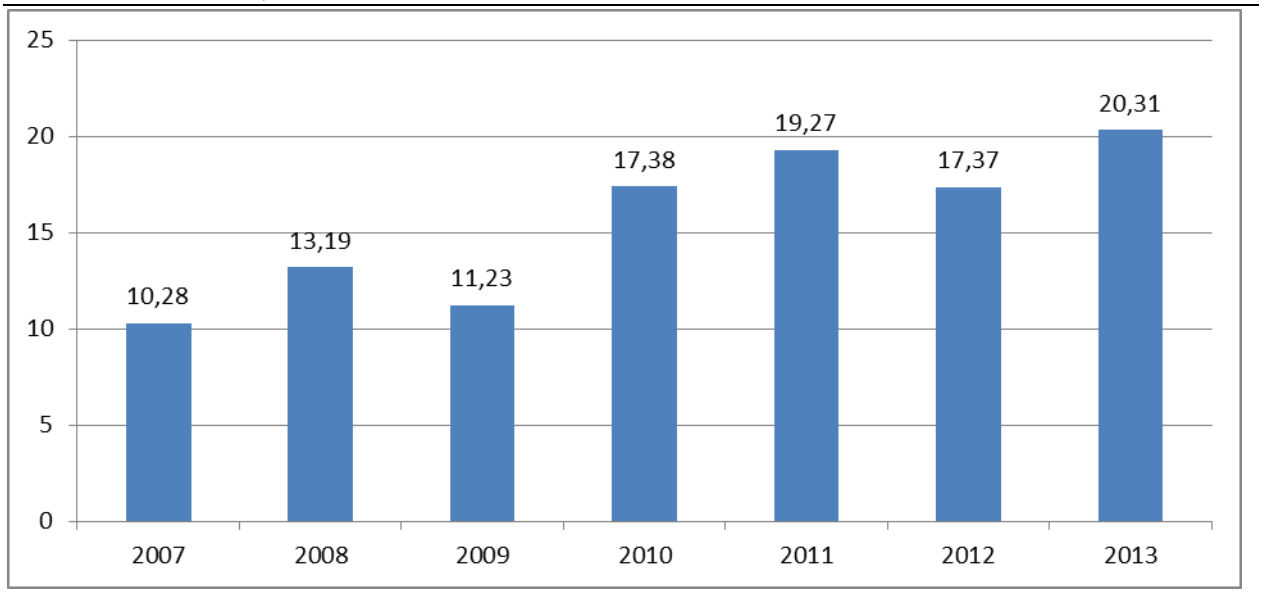

Fig. 2. The agricultural production (at current prices) obtained from an employed person in the period 2007-2013

First, given that the main demotivating factor for young people is the reduced possibility to make a career and, therefore, to achieve their professional ambitions and to secure a decent living [5], the educational institutions have to convince the young people that there are still possibilities to make a career. It is also necessary to put more emphasis on the development of the entrepreneurial skills and investigative capacity, which would change students' opinions on rural issues, on their theoretical and practical training for business and on the reduction of psychological impediments.

This implies, in its turn, a series of complementary actions to those already implemented: the modernization of study content by putting a greater emphasis on business related issues; undertaking further efforts to train students skills in market investigation, improving decisions under risk and uncertainty, risk management, financial and economic diagnostic of the enterprise activity; promotion of prosperous businesses, thus demonstrating to students that there are opportunities and real prerequisites for success in one area or another; instilling the idea that any success could be reached only by planned efforts etc.

Another important factor is the interaction of universities with business environment. On the other hand, businesses must also contribute to the optimization of synergies between vocational education and practical work. The correlation between these two important components of society: higher education and business environment is presented schematically in Figure 3.

It is clear that achieving the optimum level of such interactions would have multiple effects on both the training system of future specialists and the business environment. However, it is necessary to recognize that the availability of these two components - university-business - for cooperation, is different. The universities, activating under competition, being subject to very rigorous and demanding assessments, by linking their activities to the quality management system requirements, need, somehow, to make permanent attempts of cooperation with enterprises in various aspects. Unfortunately, the enterprises still show a low or even the lack of such an interest.

Thus, the conclusion of agreements concerning the performance of student internships in different enterprises, the participation of enterprise representatives in certain meetings organized within universities, their involvement in certain activities related to curricula improvement often become very difficult because of the categorical refusal of the enterprise managers and specialists. In these circumstances, the task to get students closer to business environment becomes difficult to carry out

because of businesses' refusal to cooperate.

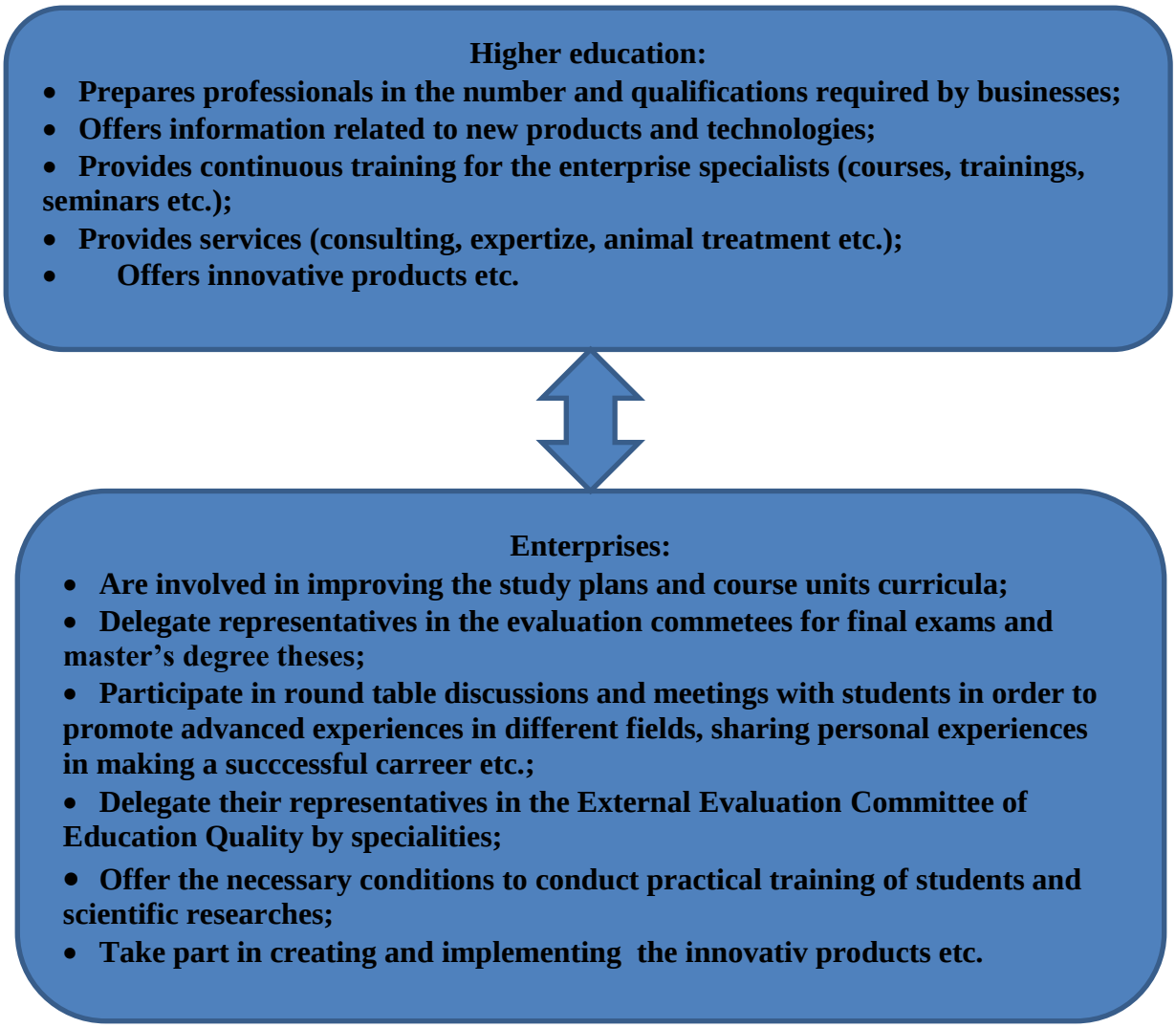

Fig. 3. The correlation between higher education and business environment

As a result, the task to orient professionally State Agrarian University of Moldova graduates to rural business environment lies entirely on the responsibility and enthusiasm of the university's academic and scientific staff.

Considering the above-mentioned facts, it is clear that the state must find some mechanisms to motivate enterprises to cooperate with universities: either establishing through legislation the obligation to create special funds for innovative laboratories or through tax incentives in situations when special means are allocated for innovations or other measures that „would wake up" the economic units and would switch them to cooperate with the vocational education system. Even if these relationships work naturally in the economically developed countries, without being catalyzed by the state, we should recognize that in the Republic of Moldova, a country that has stepped into the market economy not so long ago, many managers still have set their mind on immediate results, on the fear of everything is new and unusual and on conservatism. Another mentality problem is the fact of not recognizing that, in addition to strictly determined responsibilities arising from the employment contract, there are also certain civic obligations.

CONCLUSIONS

The assessment of knowledge value acquired in vocational education should be done in

terms of its impact on business environment, this impact mediating ultimately the influence on the labour market indicators.

Despite the representative number of bachelor's and master's degree graduates in the agricultural areas, the employment of young people with higher education in rural areas is done very slowly.

Tackling the problem of youth employment in the rural areas and hence, the economic development of those areas and improving labour market indicators requires, on the one hand, the modernization of training in universities and on the other hand – close collaboration with the business environment.

By examining the attitude of enterprise managers and specialists towards universities proposals for cooperation, one could note a very low responsiveness to them.

It is required some state intervention in the economic agents' motivation for a closer cooperation with universities through various mechanisms: tax incentives, establishing through legislation the obligation to create special funds for innovative laboratories etc. Finally, the results of such collaboration, due to its beneficial effects on the economic performance of enterprises, would provide added value to vocational education.

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