

Assessments of alumni of Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv (TSNUK) on higher education in Ukraine

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I. Higher education in Ukraine and abroad: advantages and disadvantages?

The Department of Modern and Contemporary History of Foreign Countries of Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv proposed this topic for discussion in August 2022 before their alumni to find out the real prospects of building joint educational programs with European colleagues. The views and assessments of our graduates who have made successful educational, scientific, and professional careers over the last 10-15 years not only in Ukraine but also abroad were particularly important to us.

1.1. Among about **a hundred successful graduates** - historians, sociologists, political scientists, philosophers, German philologists who are connected by the experience of participation in various bilateral cooperation projects with German partner universities (Regensburg, Munich, Konstanz), as well as partial or full study abroad, about 20 alumni were selected as an expert focus group who expressed their desire to participate in the discussion of the proposed topic. The vast majority of the participants in the discussion have master's degrees, obtained both at Shevchenko University and in Germany, and have many years of professional experience outside Ukraine. Three of them prepared and defended their dissertations in Germany. In this discussion, the participants relied not only on the German but also on the American and Canadian experience of organizing higher education.

1.2. Acknowledging the achievements and positive aspects of studying at Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv, which allowed our alumni to successfully continue their academic and professional careers abroad, they focused on analyzing the problems and challenges that need to be addressed in Ukraine on the way to closer integration into the European educational space. One of the most noticeable and obvious problems that still remains unresolved **is the insufficient level of foreign**

language proficiency among both students and teaching staff. This is the main limitation for our students to participate in various academic mobility programs, grant projects, etc.

In addition to language competencies, the issue of students mastering **methodological skills, the ability to work in a team** during their studies, as well as proficiency **in various data systems, and digitalization methods** were also raised, which would significantly affect the quality and productivity of the educational process.

1.3. One of the significant problems pointed out by our alumni-experts is the **extensiveness and overloading of the educational process**. Phenomena such as "rote learning", retelling material, factual bias (instead of conceptual), oversaturation with general-theoretical issues, and insufficient connection with practice are quite common. This problem also applies to teachers, as they often have to conduct several classes per day and engage in research activities at the same time. However, it was noted that it is possible to "take" the educational process out of the classroom and follow the European/American system's experience with field seminars (both in Ukraine and abroad), excursions, etc.

1.4. The next contentious discussion topic was the issue of maximally **objective evaluation**. For example, one of the participants in the discussion cited the German experience of evaluating student knowledge and skills, where the grade depends equally on three components, namely: a) group (team) work, presentations; b) the ability to express one's opinion in writing and perform various written tasks; c) the ability to express one's opinion orally and conduct a discussion (oral exam).

1.5. As for areas related to the educational process, **funding** should be highlighted first and foremost, as teachers often receive extremely low salaries. This, in turn, does not allow for the improvement of **quality and competition among the teaching staff**. Attention was also drawn several times to the **management staff**, who often do not understand or appreciate the significance of European education.

1.6. The last point to consider is **the functioning of libraries**, which are quite outdated, bureaucratized, and thus unable to offer a modern work culture in the library. From the European/American experience, libraries should operate around the clock, have convenient, comfortable, well-equipped halls, and be fully digitalized. They should be the place where students can easily access foreign literature, especially articles from scientometric databases.

II. Conclusions and Suggestions

In defining **the strategy and the primary goal** of development for higher humanitarian education in Ukraine, the main focus should be on mastering the methods of obtaining scientific knowledge and meanings, rather than on the volume of this knowledge. Cultivating a critical approach to any objects of cognition, acquired knowledge, and concepts are necessary. There is an urgent need to go beyond the extensive information-reproducing model of professional knowledge formation, which has been inherited from the Soviet past and is still being reproduced today. In these conditions, it is essential to orient oneself towards European civilization values and didactic principles, rejecting dogmatism, authoritarianism, and bureaucracy in education and science, cultivating freedom of thought and creativity, respect for intellectual property, and academic integrity promoting fair and open competition as a source of progress.

1. In order to better meet **the needs and demands of the labor market** for social and humanitarian specialists, it is necessary to:

1.1. Focus on the *interdisciplinarity of educational programs*, especially at the master's level, which ensures higher competitiveness of graduates in the labor market.

1.2. Engage successful *specialists from real-life professional fields* as lecturers alongside regular university faculty, from Ukraine and beyond, including former successful graduates for the purpose of conducting compact practical courses or workshops on a short-term flexible basis (moonlighting, part-time, hourly pay, labor agreement, etc.).

1.3. Ensure the organization of real *production practice* in various fields of future professional activity not only on a group basis (as has been done to date), but also on an *individual basis* and according to *individual schedules*, taking into account the individual or special needs and requests of students and encouraging their initiative.

2. In the field of improving the organization of **the educational process and learning technologies**, it is necessary to:

2.1. Provide students with a *wider and freer choice of disciplines*, including those that go beyond one field or faculty, while reducing the overall classroom workload for students. This is especially important for master's degree educational programs.

2.2. Reduce the proportion of linear, information-reproducing formats of classes (lectures) in favor of *more interactive forms* (various types of seminars and practical classes). They involve the development of independent thinking, critical and cognitive abilities, and practical skills of students, as well as require them to perform small, but independent creative-search tasks during the course, rather than copying and voicing or sending basic information from the Internet to professors.

It is imperative to cultivate students' ability to work independently and critically with texts, using a variety of seminar and practical training formats to a greater extent. In Ukraine, seminar classes are traditionally subordinated to lecture courses, which makes their role secondary compared to lectures. So, it is necessary to get rid of this obsolete hierarchy and *give seminars the role of the main and self-sufficient form of learning* when mastering certain academic disciplines. To achieve this, it is necessary to abandon the dogmatic proportion between lectures and seminars in the planning of professors' pedagogical workload, which has long ceased to meet the requirements of the time and the modern European education model.

2.3. Implement **the competitive principle in the educational organization process and teaching** to both students and professors more fully and consistently. For students, this allows further development of *internal academic mobility*, specifically the opportunity to attend and study (with subsequent recognition and evaluation) courses of interest to them in other educational programs, faculties, or even

universities. Regarding professors, this implies the necessary *evaluation of the effectiveness and quality of their teaching activity by students*, as well as the wider involvement of invited professors from abroad and other universities in Ukraine.

2.4. To enable non-language major students *to study foreign languages* (typically a second foreign language related to their professional choice) through an *individualized plan or schedule* provided by the Institute of Philology, which should serve as a service center for all students seeking educational services in the study of foreign languages. Moving towards a more flexible model of educational trajectory and individualized learning plans is necessary to better cater to the needs and abilities of students.

2.5. Broaden the implementation of such modern forms of **digitization** as Modul, LMS (Learning Management System), and others in the educational process.

2.6. A fundamental reorganization of the work of **the library of the Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv** is necessary, as it has fallen far behind the functional capabilities required by the times. Compared to the libraries of universities in Europe and the USA, it has ceased to be the convenient and comfortable place where students and researchers obtain their knowledge and spend much of their time on independent work.
