

# INCREASING THE QUALITY OF BULGARIAN HIGHER EDUCATION THROUGH STRATEGIES FOR ACADEMIC PERSONNEL MANAGEMENT

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## Abstract

*The strategies for academic personnel management as a factor for increasing the quality of higher education are discussed in the present article. The quality of the educational service is not only a national and European priority, but it is also a basic strategic advantage of every Bulgarian university, currently functioning in a highly competitive environment – for this reason it is steadily outlined in its strategy for development. One of the ways for improving the education is through elaboration of the system for human resource management. In essence it is intended to attract, retain and motivate the quality personnel through a collection of policies, procedures, and criteria in the field of training, assessment and reward. In this connection there are presented the strategies for personnel training and motivating, applied by Bulgarian higher schools as an instrument for improving the work performance. There are identified real and potential problems and on this basis is demonstrated the necessity of improving the motivational policies and practices as a means for improving the quality of the educational service. Some possible solutions for increasing the motivation in academic environment are offered.*

**Key words:** higher education, human resource management, personnel motivation, quality, strategy.

## Introduction

The main *objective* of the present theoretical research is to present the strategies in the field of **human resource management, which Bulgarian universities currently apply and to discuss** their effectiveness in the light of the quality of the offered educational service.

In connection with this objective there are outlined the following *tasks*:

- 1) To demonstrate the necessity of increasing the quality of higher education;
- 2) To present the HRM system as a factor, influencing the teachers' work behavior and hence the quality of the educational service;
- 3) **To present the main strategies, applied in the field of training and rewarding of personnel** in Bulgarian universities;
- 4) To discuss their effectiveness from the point of view of the personnel's work performance;
- 5) To demonstrate and suggest the necessity of improving the strategies for personnel motivation.

It is useful to make the following *specification*: as many different models for assessment of the **education quality exist, obviously it is measured through different indicators and is influenced** by many factors. The present article limits only to the role of the HRM system and does not consider the whole totality of influencing factors, nor the criteria used for its assessment.

The necessity of doing such a research could be argued by the following:

- 1) The quality of higher education is extremely important – it is a national priority and

an object of support by the government, as well as by the European Union. For this reason the government controls it through the accreditation system – therefore every university is obliged to fulfill some requirements as minimum. On the other hand, every educational institution is personally interested in the quality of the service which offers – it is its main strategic advantage and even a means for survival in the highly competitive educational environment. The problem is especially critical for the private universities in Bulgaria (such as Burgas Free University), which operate in a quite more unfavorable environment in comparison to the public ones. They have to realize their mission, **long-term and short-term goals in an extremely complex situation: phenomenal demographic collapse, characterized with low birth-rate and aging population**, which drastically decreases the number of the secondary-school graduates in the country; exceptional competition on the part of the rest 37 public and 13 private high schools in the country, as well as abroad; deep economic crisis, which continuously reduces the purchasing capacity **of the potential consumers of the educational service; still dominating social expectations** for a lower quality of the private higher education; lack of public subsidizing; decreasing the number of people seeking professional realization and career in the educational sphere; continuous changes in the normative organization, concerning the educational system, etc.;

2) The quality of the education depends on many factors, but one of the most significant is the teaching staff. **Not surprisingly the systems for quality assessment include so many indicators**, connected with the professional capacity and work of the teachers. This means that the accent should be put on the HRM systems. These systems are intended to attract, retain and motivate the quality personnel through a collection of policies, procedures, and criteria in the field of the training, assessment and reward. Every higher school should develop strategies and policies in two basic fields – training and rewarding the personnel. It should continuously search more effective decisions in connection with the specific knowledge and skills, which the personnel should possess, as well as the most suitable methods for their assimilation; therefore it is not surprising, that every Bulgarian university currently invests so much in raising the qualification of the teachers. **But, moreover, it should continuously search mechanisms for stimulating** the teachers to assimilate these competencies, as well as to apply them in their practice;

3) It turns out that despite the significant investments in training, the academic staff does not have a desire to improve the quality of its work, because it is not satisfied by the work environment. As a consequence of the training activities the teachers do not significantly change their behavior and therefore the quality of education does not improve. The personnel satisfaction is extremely important. It has a strong effect on the motivation, hence – on the work performance and turnover and ultimately – on the quality of the educational service. Not accidentally the systems for quality assessment include the personnel satisfaction as one of the quality indicators;

4) Despite the obvious importance of the work satisfaction, neither Bulgarian university exerts efforts to investigate it. **This does not mean that the management is absolutely not interested in the personnel attitudes, but as a whole there is lacking any formal approach to its regular measuring and respectively to formulation of strategies according to the obtained results.**

These arguments directed the research interest towards the chosen problem area.

Motivation problems have always attracted the interest of the researchers. There could be found many developments in the scientific space devoted to the motivation measuring, including in academic conditions (Kolev, 2010), (Koleva, 2013), (Petkovski, 2013). All these empirical investigations find some problems with the academic staff motivation and are indisputably valuable and useful, but are quite limited, since:

1) usually include quite limited collection of motivation factors and indicators;

2) are initiated by a concrete researcher, showing personal interest to motivational problems and to the testing of some own model through investigating the representatives of a certain faculty or department;

3) pursue purely scientific objectives and in practice do not lead to any positive changes in the personnel management policy.

### **The Quality of Higher Education as a National and European Priority**

University appears during the middle Ages as a self-managing community of learners and scholars. It has undergone many transformations during the centuries, but has always saved its role of intellectual centre, preserving the connection between knowledge and life through unification of the young and the old in the filled with imagination process of scientific research. Always, including today, the society has had high expectations and respective requirements towards the academic institution – to educate the population and to function as a centre of science.

In comparison with the medieval “garden” of culture and new knowledge, contemporary university is definitely an educational and research institution with a quite different appearance and orientation. On the one hand, it is required to give not education with some absolute and infinite value, but a useful knowledge, corresponding to the qualification needs of the labor market and respectively bringing some economic benefit. On the other hand, it should be much more flexible, market-oriented and enterprising in order to survive and prosper on the extremely dynamic and competitive market of the educational services.

Despite the deep understanding of the need of good education, its quality has always been **a reflection of the economic development of the society, as well as of the dominating social norms, moral and values** (especially those of national leaders and elites). After the political reforms in 1989 Bulgarian higher education gradually entered in a crisis and in 2000 European commission logically noted a drastic drop in its quality with respect to the teaching, as well as (even to a higher degree) with respect to the research activity. The acceptance of Bulgaria in the European Union in 2007 gave almost unlimited opportunities for access to financing, but placed serious requirements to the education in parallel with this. In the context of strategy “Europe 2020” as **a main goal in Bulgarian strategy for higher education was put the increase of its quality and its harmonization with the requirements of the European Union**. This provoked a round of reforms, **including elaboration of a new National strategy for higher education development, National strategy for lifelong learning, National strategy for development of scientific researches – 2020, etc.**, double increase of the budget for education and almost treble for science, as well as introduction of systems for quality certification according to ISO-9000:2000 and ISO-9001:2008. **The goal of all these measures was to provide a commensurability of Bulgarian education to the European criteria**. In parallel with this, the Bulgarian academic institutions received a sweeping access to many national and European financial funds and instruments, such as the fund “Scientific researches”, “European social fund”, Operative program “Human resource development” and many others.

In the conditions of decentralization of higher education and autonomy of the existing 51 higher schools in Bulgaria, the public control over the quality of their activity currently is realized by the Ministry of education and science through the National agency of education and accreditation. The accreditation system and the rating system are instruments for independent monitoring and assessment, which influence the internal structure and policy of the universities by determining uniform minimum requirements and standards, and give information about the positioning of the institutions in the educational environment. At the same time they help the government **in the development of the policies for higher education, including the determination of public subsidies for the high schools**. **In the context of these reforms the quality of Bulgarian educational system as a whole is gradually slowly improving**.

In a synchrony with the **national strategic priorities in the field of higher education, currently every Bulgarian academic institution has as its mission to be flexible, enterprising and**

socially responsible in the preparation of specialists with skills for a quick professional realization in dynamically developing and globalizing environment, as well as to create publicly significant scientific results.

### **Increasing the Quality through Personnel Training**

Generally speaking, the quality of the educational service offered by a university depends on the resources which it possesses and on the way it manages them. Of all resources (human, material, financial and informational) the most important and simultaneously difficult to manage, are the human resources. The reasons for this are indisputable and easily explainable. Although the financial state, material base, ICT structure, etc. have a significant importance, not they, but namely the intellectual and social capital of the teachers creates value and essentially forms the competitive advantage of the university. They are that resource, which through its competency and motivation predetermines the quality of education, and hence – the suitability of the graduating students for adequate integration on the labor market. It is no chance that at the core of Bulgarian educational reform are the teachers and the conviction that the quality of their work is the key for quality education.

The HRM strategies and policies follow directly from the set of strategic goals and priorities of the university. Regardless of the quite different conditions in which the private and the public academic institutions function, the personnel policy is their main competitive advantage. It is oriented towards forming a highly qualified and motivated teaching staff and accents upon increasing the competencies in three main (although difficult to separate) areas, including to a great degree the variety of dimensions of the academic activity:

1) Teaching work. The continuous actualization of the academic staff knowledge and skills provides adaptation of the curricula and syllabi to the changing technologies and requirements of the labor market and the continuous elaboration of the teaching methods is a condition for successful mastering of practically useful knowledge for the students. Not only are they an object of evaluation by the accreditation system, but these skills are important for joining the teaching process to the European and world values and standards, for confirming the institution as a source of quality education and respectively for its competitiveness on the market of the educational services;

2) Research work. Increasing the competencies for conducting extensive research contributes to the intellectual and scientific growth of the academic staff, for development of its scientific potential, for building scientific collaborations, including international partnerships, for creating scientific products of high quality, for academic mobility and in the last – for helping the progress of theory and practice. Again, not only the number of the researches and publications is an object of evaluation by the accreditation system, but these competencies are important for confirming the university as an authoritative scientific centre and as a wanted partner for joint research work in the national and international scientific space;

3) Project work. Improving the project management skills contributes to the initiative and activity in preparing project proposals, as well as for the successful execution of the approved projects. Currently, every academic institution uses the projects as a means for financing research developments, for doing exchange and collaboration with partnering educational and other institutions in the country and abroad, for enrichment and development of teaching staff competencies, for improving its material-technological equipment and the processes of management and administration, etc. The project work has turned to a basic source of financing (especially for the private high schools), because of which these skills are especially important.

Currently, Bulgarian universities actively invest in activities, connected with increasing the quality of their teaching staff through development of skills in the three dimensions

pointed above: **different courses are organized and the teachers' participation in external trainings is financed**; conditions for international academic exchange and specializations abroad are provided; **research projects are financed through mini-grants**; **participations in scientific conferences and other activities are financed**; scientific forums for popularization, dissemination and application of the results from the scientific researches and developments are organized; publication of the results from the scientific activity is financed; purchasing of literature and software is financed, etc.

### **Increasing the Quality through Personnel Motivation**

The teachers' qualification is indisputably of basic importance, but not less important is their motivation. Motivation is namely the force that utilizes their potential and directs it to realization of the academic institution's goals.

The motivational strategy, as an element of the whole personnel strategy, is intended to support the strategic goals of the organization through stimulation of employees of high quality, i.e. those that have high competencies in the field of teaching, research and project activity. The strategies of Bulgarian universities sound quite similar.

The strategy is realized through a combination of policies, which present the concrete decisions in the field of work performance assessment and reward. They are meant to encourage the assimilation and utilization of the pointed competencies. Every institution should develop its own policy for motivating the personnel, but despite this the motivational policies of most Bulgarian universities are quite similar as well. The institutions try to motivate their personnel to work effectively and to increase its quality by providing the most modern, high-technology and to some extent even "luxury" work environment, termless labor agreements, high payment and other forms of recognition, opportunity for development of potential and career. At the same time only the development of "perfect" policy is not a sufficient condition for personnel motivation – it is not much more than advertising the academic management's "good intentions". Much more important meaning have the concrete actions and instruments, through which it is realized in practice.

The policies are realized through procedures and rules. **They present a collection of criteria and consecutive actions, taken in a concrete situation.** It is expected from them to provide a mechanism for differentiating the employees in such a way, that the motivational policy applied to the quality part to be different from the policy applied to the incompetent part of them. Some of the basic aspects in the HRM policy realization are normatively regulated by the government – through the Law for higher education of the Republic of Bulgaria, the Law for academic staff development, the Labor code, etc. But on the one hand, the inclusion of some rules in a law does not guarantee their execution. **On the other hand, despite the tangible tendency to standardization and unification of Bulgarian universities in the context of the strategy for building a "united European space of higher education", every university preserves a relative autonomy in preparing regulations for application of the laws, as well as in building its own systems for personnel assessment, reward and development. The different procedures and criteria for selection, attestation and scientific development, which the universities formulate and apply in order to maintain the optimal level of their academic staff, may lead to a substantial differentiation between them.**

In most universities the motivational policy is realized through stimulating mechanisms, as well as through controlling mechanisms. A differentiated payment system is applied based on the individual achievements and the results from the teaching and research work of every professor. The rewards are determined on the basis of the attestation commission's appraisal and the results from the quality control system, including an appraisal from the students as well. The scientific career is also controlled by the attestation system, as well as by the quality control

system. The criteria for assessment of the individual achievements cover the three basic areas of competencies, which is easy to explain – they result directly from the assessment criteria of the university's quality, i.e. they are predetermined by the system for accreditation and control over the quality.

### **Necessity of Improving the Motivational Practices**

The formulation of collection of procedures and criteria is not so much important as the real effects upon the perceptions and motivational attitudes of the employees, which the concrete way of their application provokes. It turns out quite often that the strategy, policy and technology for personnel motivating, although very convincingly described in the university documentation, exist only “on paper” and do not produce the desired positive effect. Actually a significant importance for the professors' work behavior have not the management's “good intentions”, materialized in the formally existing systems for attestation, reward and career development, but namely the way in which they *perceive* the application of these systems in practice. On the one hand, namely their personal satisfaction is what in essence contributes to the positive connection between the motivational strategy and the quality of the educational service (and not the academic management's convictions that a certain collection of mechanisms is “perfect”). On the other hand, it is quite possible the motivational practices to be not perceived in the same way by the personnel because of mistakes in their practical realization. **The realization of the activities depends on the concrete representatives of the academic management (at every level), engaged with them – on their motivation and competencies in the field of human resource management, on their understanding of the particular steps, elements and mechanisms in the process of motivating. Namely the differences in the approaches and instruments of the managers, applying the procedures for assessment, reward and career development, are in essence the reason for the differences in the academic personnel motivation in different universities.**

Even the most carefully developed motivational strategy could turn out ineffective. According to my personal impressions from informal conversations with colleagues working at Burgas Free University, as well as at other Bulgarian universities, the academic personnel quite often has the following perceptions:

1) There are missing clear indicators and criteria, i.e. the system for work performance appraisal is too general to provide useful and clear feedback, which makes impossible for the employees to present the behaviors which management “desires”;

2) The system of indicators and criteria are clear, but the employees do not agree with and therefore do not accept the attributed significance and value of the pointed work behaviors;

3) **In the different faculties or units different systems of indicators and criteria are applied**, i.e. there is lacking a uniform system for quality assessment of the teaching and research work;

4) The assessment criteria put an accent predominantly upon a certain aspect of the whole work behavior (for example, the research activity), which leads to neglecting the other aspects (for example, the teaching or project activity);

5) The criteria put an accent upon the quantity, which leads to neglecting the quality;

6) **The appraisal is perceived as subjective, unfair and inadequate, because of inappropriate methods for information gathering or personal attitude on the part of the appraiser;**

7) The connection between the assessment system and the reward system, including the career development, is missing – the attestation procedures are purely formal and aimless and do not result in any significant outcomes for the employees;

8) There are missing individual plans for development and clearly outlined career lines because of **missing constructive dialogue with the immediate manager, which turns the academic career in fogging, distant and vague goal;**

9) The leadership style of the immediate manager is inadequate, which blocks the vertical communication flows in the organization;

10) The offered rewards are not attractive enough for the employees, which harms additionally their internal motivation, following from personal interest and pleasure from the work itself;

11) The offered forms of training are perceived as useless, which additionally harms the motivation for development of academic potential.

The list of negative perceptions could be endless. Obviously this situation could not be overcome just by “coping” motivational strategies and policies that sound promising, but there are really needed effective mechanisms (procedures and criteria) for differentiating the personnel according to its quality. Only in this way the academic institution will have an instrument for attraction, utilization and development of its highly qualified academic staff and respective for attaining its goals.

The academic personnel has the needs that it expects to satisfy at the workplace and if it does not happen it is possible to observe many negative effects – lack of motivation for quality work, bad morale and work discipline, lack of initiative, hostility towards the academic management, alienation from the organization and its goals, high level of stress, feeling of helplessness and dead-lock. In this situation the staff does not have a desire to develop and to acquire skills in the pointed above three basic areas, to improve the teaching methods, to initiate and participate in projects, to create research developments, etc. This inevitably lowers the quality of the educational service, the institution loses its competitiveness and the educational system as a whole worsens its characteristics.

The dissatisfied work force confronts a choice - to leave the organization, seeking better opportunities for alternative employment, or to stay, taking advantages of the external and internal rewards which yet receives despite its low work effectiveness. The two scenarios are equally unfavorable. In the first case unfortunately usually victims of turnover become the teachers of highest quality - they have a higher mobility and chance to find better employment, since they possess competencies for which some competitive schools are ready to “pay” more. And this in practice means a loss of human capital and real strategic advantage for the organization. The second scenario is currently very typical for Bulgaria. The teaching staff remains in the organization, realizing the lack of alternatives on the labor market (characterizing with high level of unemployment), as well as because of the so called “occupational entrenching”, where it becomes almost impossible for the employees to set free from the long standing binding mechanisms with the employer (psychological, social, financial, etc.).

## Conclusions

The quality of higher education and especially the ways for improving it are an actual and significant problem for the Bulgarian reality. It is a fact that Bulgarian higher education is in crisis, which outlines its development as a global priority and an object of support on the behalf of the government, as well as on the behalf of the European Union. The solutions of this problem could be searched in connection with the strategies for academic personnel management and therefore currently most Bulgarian universities actively invest in improving knowledge, skills and abilities of the teaching staff. But in the light of these continuously increasing investments it is worth to think over the following - are they quite enough to really support the improvement of the offered educational service? Motivation is the force that utilizes the personnel’s potential and directs it towards the realization of the academic institution’s goals. Without underestimating the significance of the investments in the teaching staff’s competencies, the overall conclusion is that it is more necessary to exert constant efforts in building effective systems for personnel motivation, which contribute not only to its attraction and retention, but mostly to its maximum utilization and development.

In the light of the priority significance of the education quality and having in mind its connection with the academic personnel motivation, the necessity of improving the HRM strategies in Bulgarian higher schools is obvious. Improving the motivational environment requires continuous monitoring of the degree of personnel satisfaction from different aspects of the work situation, as well as developing right strategies for increasing the satisfaction.

In fact no manager is indifferent to personnel motivation because of its influence upon the work performance and upon the effectiveness of the organization as a whole. For this reason the management of every higher school exerts efforts to monitor its level. But unfortunately most often it does not have a reliable enough instrument for motivation diagnosing and analysis, which forces it to rely on observation and informal channels for providing information. Although useful, this information is in no case reliable and comprehensive and respectively could not serve for building adequate system of practices, methods and stimuli.

Besides this, the most popular model for assessing the quality of education in universities is EFQM. It includes many assessment criteria, some of which are connected with personnel management – qualification, control, motivation, training, career development, working conditions, etc. One of the basic criteria is personnel satisfaction. It is assessed in two aspects: 1) mechanism for information gathering by the management, and 2) level of professors' satisfaction and motivation for active teaching and research activity. This means that personnel satisfaction is not only a factor for improving education, but a criterion for its quality as well. Therefore the monitoring and measuring of personnel motivation is not a question of voluntary choice and rational thinking on the part of the academic management, but an objective necessity according to the requirements of the quality system.

Actually, every Bulgarian university has a system for education quality management. The following could be read in its documentary description: "Its information provision is done through inquiries among students, employers and teachers. The teachers' inquiry is meant to investigate their satisfaction from the students' preparation, as well as from the created conditions for teaching and research work" (see for example the Web site of Burgas Free University). The problem is that it never happens in practice, rather sounds as a promise, expressing the good intentions of the management body.

The situation definitely needs some change. **Through a systematic formal approach towards the motivation investigation, the management body could have an actual personnel motivation profile at every moment. This will not only give opportunity for assessing the effectiveness of the functioning HRM system, but will facilitate the introduction of some corrections in order to improve it.** The identification and constant monitoring of motivation forming factors will allow the planning of interventions in order to utilize the existing reserves.

It is necessary the investigations of the motivation climate: 1) to be done through a specially developed diagnostic instrument or a complex methods, including a comprehensive aggregate of criteria and indicators for measuring of personnel motivation, **as well as its forming factors**; 2) to include the representatives of the whole academic staff. Only in this way the assessment of the motivational attitudes could generate some concrete practical use for the academic management. Of course, the taking of suitable decisions and their practical realization remains a question of competencies and personal motivation on the behalf of the representatives of the management team.

As a conclusion it could be summarized, that there are mostly needed effective mechanisms (procedures and criteria) for differentiating the personnel according to its quality and on this base differentiating the applied motivational policies. Only in this way the academic institution will have an instrument for attraction, utilization and development of its highly qualified academic staff and respectively for offering an education of high quality.



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