
“THE COBBLER WHO WEARS THE BEST SHOES”: HOW TO EDUCATE THE STAFF OF THE HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS USING DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES. STUDY OF THE PLEKHANOV UNIVERSITY EXPERIENCE

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Introduction

Among communities of different levels, education of which is to be organized under the special scheme, perhaps the most specific one is the staff of the higher education institutions themselves. Unfortunately, a common saying about “the cobbler who always wears the worst shoes” often becomes very actual in such situations. Meanwhile, these educational programs often have very high relevance, which can be clearly illustrated by the Russian example. The majority of Russian universities are public, and receive the funds from the state budgets in order to conduct their activities. In a sense, this situation is the heritage of the Soviet era, although, of course, with the transition to a market economy, many higher education institutions have switched to making their own funds. This process seems very positive in the light of reducing the burden on the State budgets. However, the share of self-earned funds in the budgets of the Russian universities is still relatively small (no more than 51% in average). The situation is aggravated by the fact that higher educational organizations are conservative, “slow” in changeovers, and most of the managerial staff of universities (especially regional) does not command effective methods and tools of financial management. Moreover, there is a systemic problem – the heads of universities financial services almost never link the financial results of the universities with their development strategy, selected set of educational programs, the main parameters of the educational processes etc.

Therefore, in 2017, the Ministry of education and science of the Russian Federation (MES RF) has given the Plekhanov Russian University of Economics (PRUE) and the Ural Federal University (UrFU) the task of designing the special study programs aimed for the professional development of universities financial managers and specialists of strategic development. According to this task, the PRUE and the UrFU had to train at least three representatives from each higher educational institution of Russia. Since the organization of education of such number of participants, scattered geographically across the vast country, on full-time basis was extremely hard to implement, the program was developed with wide application of digital technologies used by universities in various educational programs.

“Tools of planning and implementation of mechanisms for sustainable economic development of universities” study program

The new educational program called “Tools of planning and implementation of mechanisms for sustainable economic development of universities” included 7 main themes:

1. The balanced system of strategic objectives.
2. Overview of financial strategies for decision-making.
3. Process approach to organizational change.
4. The system of remuneration and incentives.
5. Project management.
6. Rating of the financial management quality.
7. Informatization as the basis of efficiency.

The learning process lasted for 6 months (from late June to the end of December 2017) and was divided into four stages:

- Stage 1 – self-examination for two weeks during which the participants have filled 4 questionnaires developed by the organizers of the training, followed with one-month distance learning, which included two webinars. The distance learning within the program had not required the development of a special electronic system. The university used the LMS on the Moodle platform, which currently serves as the electronic learning platform for the PRUE distance learning students.
- Stage 2 – full-time three-day training in the form of intensive interactive sessions at the PRUE and the UrFU.
- Stage 3 – team work of the students in distance learning format for 6-8 weeks aimed to develop specific projects that can bring economic benefits. This stage also included two webinars.
- Stage 4 – one-day intramural presentation of the developed projects for the Commission consisting of the PRUE professors and representatives of the MES RF.

The structure of the assessment of trainees during the study of the program was as follows:

- 10% – peer assessment of questionnaires completed by listeners;
- 10% – timeliness, completeness of assignments for independent work;
- 30% – work during the session;
- 50% – assessment of public project defence.

Upon completion of the program all teams of the universities who participated in the program as listeners, had to present a set of materials, including:

- balanced system of objectives and indicators of the university, key KPIs for 3-5 years;
- enumeration and assessment of the processes critical for the realization of strategic goals;

“The Cobbler Who Wears the Best Shoes”: How to Educate the Staff of the Higher Education Institutions Using Digital Technologies. Study of the Plekhanov University Experience

Olga A. Grishina et al.

- project summary for changing of one of the university activity processes that are important for economic efficiency;
- organizational and administrative documents of the university, initiating and implementing the project launched;
- adjustments to the plan financially-economic activities of the university.

For the final project the universities teams were able to choose different themes. The structure of the projects prepared by teams of the universities (in the general view) was as follows:

- implementation of additional education and professional retraining at the university – 28%;
- improvement of the management system – 21%;
- creation of centres of project activities – 14%;
- improvement of the system of remuneration and incentives – 12%;
- improvement of the university performance by outsourcing of non-core activity – 8%;
- introduction and development of distance learning – 3%;
- other topics – 15%.

In total more than 500 people from 203 higher education institutions of Russia were trained within the program. 60% of the attendees were employees of financial services, 40% – of not financial. Division into staff categories was as follows:

- the rector or vice-rector – 20%;
- chief accountant – 12%;
- chief financial officer – 30%;
- chiefs and main specialists of the leading services – 38%.

Results and feedback

Upon the end of the program the first group of participants were asked to rate the organization of the event, the curriculum and the skill level of the speakers. The analysis of the responses showed the following results:

1. Almost all participants noted the timeliness and topicality of the program. 80% have rated the topicality at the maximum, 20% noted that the workshop was rather relevant (“The program of the workshop was formed based on current goals, which every University comes across”).
2. The participants of the seminar highly appreciated the quality of the program (55% gave the highest rating, 45% rated it well). It was noted that the structure of the training program is optimal, all range of issues are interlinked, there is a logical sequence of the study material presentation and the duration of the program matches the content. It was noted that the range of issues covered by the program is useful for application in practical activities of the universities, and the answers to many questions in development of university strategy are given.

3. Listeners noted the good combination of theoretical and practical orientation of the program. 72% gave the highest rating, respectively, 28% have rated the issue for good. It was noted that the workshop is not overloaded with theory, practical work was consistent with the theoretical material gained during the day. The theory was supported by practical individual tasks and homework.
4. The audience highly appreciated the methods used for conducting the program, and the skills of the speakers (83% on this indicator was given the maximum *excellent* rate, respectively, 17% have rated the issue for *good*) (“Regarding the high level of professional skills for all speakers there is no doubt. Materials prepared and presented in a very clear, intelligible and substantive manner”). The listeners distinguished especially the two speakers, Sandler and Zipes, who were simultaneously the moderators of the full-time seminars. There was noted a good teamwork of these teachers, the first of which was the representative of business sphere able to command the best practices of corporate management, and the second, being the university ambassador, could circumstantially evaluate these methods in relation to the features and specifics of the university management.
5. All students without exception noted the high quality of the program organization (78% gave it the highest rating, 12% rated for *good*). Complaints to the room equipment, technical and operation support of the study process were not mentioned. The program schedule was strictly maintained, there were no gaps and unnecessary pauses in the work. (“Very good atmosphere, created by the convenience of collaboration and communication. Excellent technical support and convenience for all participants”).

Comments and suggestions expressed by the participants were following:

1. The need to continue holding such workshops was strictly noted. (“Regular organization of such seminars helps to build teams within universities, it is extremely important to exchange views and problems with colleagues from other universities”; “It is desirable to hold similar events more than once a year”).
2. It was suggested that there should be more clearly formulated requirements on the formation of the study groups. The lack of stringent requirements on the number of students has resulted in a situation when in a number of universities the groups of participants were formed quite arbitrarily.
3. Many participants noted that the program should involve university rectors as listeners (“A huge problem when applying the knowledge is a resistance from senior management. Thus the knowledge acquired through the program may not be implemented in a timely manner”; “We kindly request you to invite university rectors to such workshops”).
4. A lot of wishes has been expressed concerning the order of formation of groups for independent work. Suggestions were given that the groups should consist of representatives of universities with similar specific of activities, or may otherwise be formed based on the rating of universities financial management efficiency.

“The Cobbler Who Wears the Best Shoes”: How to Educate the Staff of the Higher Education Institutions Using Digital Technologies. Study of the Plekhanov University Experience

Olga A. Grishina et al.

5. Regarding the content of the program some suggestions were made for enabling legal issues, examination of the practices of restructuring in the financial services. It was proposed to consider in more detail the issues related to the work of the Automated management system for plans of financial and economic activities (AMS PFEA) developed by the Ministry of Education and Science of the Russian Federation (MES RF), and pay more attention to financial planning. The listeners would like to see a representative of MES RF within the course of the program in order to obtain the necessary advice. Suggestions were also made that within the bounds of this program MES FR may organize business meetings related to the questions provided in the curriculum.
6. The general wish was expressed to provide the program with more practical examples, showing both successful and unsuccessful experiences of universities in the implementation of certain projects.

Thus, thanks to digital technologies the professional training program for TOP-management of a large number of universities was implemented for relatively short time. As a result of the training program implementation, the result wished by the MES RF was achieved – heads of the higher educational institutions financial services had looked differently at their functionality. They established systematic and structural link between the universities development goals and objectives and their financial stability. The results and efficiency of the program may also be radically enhanced by its continuation, when each university acts in turn as the customer. The management of each university is supposed to form a *team of changes* (15-20 promising young employees), which is trained on the program described above, and then together with experts from the PRUE develops real projects and bring them to reality.

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“The Cobbler Who Wears the Best Shoes”: How to Educate the Staff of the Higher Education Institutions Using Digital Technologies. Study of the Plekhanov University Experience

Olga A. Grishina et al.

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