

Ukrainian Education: The State of Reform



(Serhiy Kvit's Speech at School of Slavonic and East European Studies, *University College London*, December 08, 2015)

I am here to speak to you today about the state of education and the education reform process in Ukraine. But in order to understand the content and progress of education reforms in Ukraine we must first consider the circumstances under which they occur and discover the point from which they began.

Overcoming Soviet legacy

Characteristics such as “post-Soviet society” or “a country with a transitional economy” are relevant to Ukraine, but they do not provide us with concrete information or enhance our understanding of the country. They only point to corruption as a defining feature of transitional societies, and bring us closer, by this description, to third-world countries. “Transitional” in this case means a certain stable state when a country spends more than it earns, and earned wealth is allocated unjustly. This is a true, but depressing view.

Let us attempt to expand our understanding of Ukraine in a way that considers the realities, but also highlights the many things we have to be optimistic about.

First, post-Soviet Ukraine is not a country of the third world, particularly if we consider her highly educated population. This points to an untapped potential that will allow Ukraine to build itself. Secondly, the idea of Europeanization or modernization that has failed to gain traction in third-world countries can be successful in Ukraine. Thirdly, the Revolution of Dignity was, in fact, a revolution of values that laid the foundations for an active civil society and turned Ukraine into a nation of volunteers.

Before we begin, we should first contemplate the role that education plays in society. How can we determine the nature of education? Is it a revolutionary field or is it a conservative field? Do we need shock therapy or do we require an evolutionary path towards its reform? Obviously, you can find supporters of both approaches, who will be equally right. These are some of the questions that Ukraine is seeking to understand within the context of its own history and present-day realities.

If we are to adequately try and determine the role that education plays in Ukrainian society, then we must also consider the context in which the current education system

emerged. The Ukrainian educational system was permanently changed after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. It is important to note, however, that these changes were not planned, conceptual changes, but were rather chaotic changes fueled by necessity and the realities of the time.

Mostly these changes were aimed at the survival of schools and of commercialisation – as it was implemented in Ukraine, largely translated to the sale of diplomas and resulted in what we can see now as the criminalization of the system. Tolerance for corruption in schools and violations of academic integrity policies are inextricably connected to the ambivalent attitudes towards corruption in society and the corruption of the state system. In Ukraine today, visual advertising informs you that it is possible to buy a dissertation or a research article from various providers in order to hand in to your professor or teacher.

To demonstrate the nature of how forms of “educational capitalism,” like this, as it emerged in Ukraine manifests itself at a student-level, consider the following research: “Democratic initiatives”¹, a research fund in Ukraine, posited a question to students about corruption. The students were provided with the following sentence starter: “corruption is for you ...” and then were asked to complete the sentence with various options. Only 31% of students answered “crime”. More interesting, 20.8% of students considered it to be “normal social life”, while an additional 35.1% responded that corruption is “one of the possible ways to solve existing problems”.

Another body of research on the academic culture of Ukrainian students shows that 78% of students believe that their colleagues pass exams at universities not through their own abilities, but rather through the utilization of different types of academic fraud.² There are several obstacles facing our endeavor to reform this education system. It is perhaps the psychology of Post-Soviet Ukraine that stands at the forefront of these challenges. Indeed, this legacy is such that the population fails to believe the sincerity of the fact that basic education is a *national* priority. A fundamental lack of faith in the work that we are trying to accomplish serves as one of the biggest challenges that we face. This is the legacy from which we attempt to move the nation and its education forward.

Secondly, the conservatism of university management hinders bringing reform to fruition at a practical level. Without the support of those charged with carrying out the education of our students, laws and policies are rendered ineffective. Thirdly, the education system suffers from a fundamental lack of funds. In 2014-2015, there was, understandably, a dramatic increase in the defense budget of Ukraine. In most cases we witness the removal, not the concentration of financial resources in this area.

Therefore, important programs directed at the implementation of educational reforms cannot be funded now. At the moment, we have the opportunity to adopt new laws and change the rules; implementation of these changes will follow when the capacity to do so becomes available.

A fourth obstacle is found in the inadequate network of secondary and vocational education institutions, formed mostly in Soviet times, which do not meet the demands of the national economy. We have born witness to the rise of a huge number of new, poor quality, institutions of higher education- mainly private- which were established in the first few years of independence. Private universities are not positioned to compete with

state institutions because they don't conduct qualitative selection of entrants and they pay virtually no attention to research.

So what exactly is our system of education and science like?

Ukraine has a total population of over 42 million. Of these, 7 million 783 thousand and 687 people are studying. One million 490 thousand and 857 people are working in the educational system. We have 15,002 kindergartens, 17,604 schools, 382 boarding schools, 940 vocational schools, and 317 high schools in total.

The total educational budget is about 4 billion and 340 million US dollars, which is 5.15% of GDP. Higher education takes 28.3% of the money, while secondary education accounts for 42.4%, pre-school education accounts for 17% and vocational education accounts for 5.9% of the total budget.

Annually less than 200 million USD is spent on research, which is 0.25% of GDP. 60% of this is spent on the National Academy of Sciences system and only 10% of the money for research goes to Ukrainian universities. An undeclared war and the subsequent economic crisis explain this extreme lack of funding.

The Ministry of Education and Science must consider higher education in relation to other levels of education, like pre-school, after-school, secondary, vocational, and adult education. Indeed, research is inextricably connected to higher education, which is tied to the caliber of the students that are graduating from primary and secondary education. For this reason, the reform of higher education depends on positive changes in all of the levels of Ukrainian education.

The legal framework of reforms is developing accordingly. Last year, the Law "On higher education" came into force. Today, the following bills are passing through Parliament: The bill "On Education", "On vocational education", and "On science and research".

Our priorities are:

1. Universal access to quality education
2. The decentralization of governance
3. The autonomy of educational institutions
4. Deregulation
5. Reduction in bureaucracy
6. Public-private partnership and state-community management

In secondary education, teachers are subject to low social status as a consequence of pedagogical university graduates earning a salary that is equivalent to 65 US dollars per month, while the average salary in the sector is not much higher, at 145 US dollars.

Furthermore, the content of education also needs reform. Conceptual approaches to the forms and methods of teaching are being revised to that end. Along with the adoption of the basic law “On education,” we plan to transition to 12-year schools with streaming in the final three years.

In vocational education, the rights to make important decisions are being transferred to the regional level. Regional councils of stakeholders are being established. Council members include representatives of business, local government, educational institutions and experts. These councils will look for appropriate solutions aimed at the development of vocational education and will provide adequate resources. At the same time, new types of vocational education are being established. The entire network and professional orientation of vocational education are being formulated to meet the demands of the labor market and the national economy.

The Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine reflects on the experiences of its partners and draws on the lessons that can be learned from those who have successfully done what we are trying to do. For example, Ukraine looks to the experience and expertise of Poland, which had a similar premise of educational reform after 1991, in order to guide some of our own reforms. Ukraine looks to the United Kingdom concerning the implementation of an entire national educational system, to the USA concerning higher education, to Canada and Finland concerning secondary education and to the Netherlands where concerns vocational education.

Let us look now at Ukraine’s efforts in reforming higher education.

The main principle underlying the reform of higher education is the autonomy of universities. By this we mean the academic, financial and organizational autonomy of universities. The adoption of the law “On Higher Education” in summer, 2014 was preceded by several years of hard work of the academic community, politicians and experts on the text of the document, beginning in 2011 under the regime of Yanukovich.

The struggle for the start of this reform actually began at the end of 2010 when I, from the position of the President of Kyiv Mohyla Academy, had the opportunity to publicly oppose the bill of the previous Minister of Education and Science Dmytro Tabachnyk. That document replicated the “vertical” style of Russian governance, where all decisions in a university are made by the rector, or the minister, or Yanukovich. There was no room for debate and no possibility of autonomy.

It is important to understand that the present ministerial team was formed from the former oppositionists who believe that the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine has no other interests than public ones, to serve Ukrainian citizens with the highest caliber of education possible. But this also means that the Ministry of Education and Science serves the interests of those charged with educating the Ukrainian people, the educational institutions and educators themselves. The first victories were won in the sphere of public rhetoric, but now we find that opposition to university autonomy is largely found in those that consider the task too complicated, too daunting and requiring too much work.

In spite of this, the implementation of the law “On higher education” still moves forward with great momentum. Here are some examples:

The real battle in the reform unfolded around the new list of fields and specialties. The Soviet government considered the work of a teacher as nothing more than communication with students in the classroom. The needs of personal professional growth, participation in research and preparing for lectures and practical classes weren't taken into account at all. There were very few, if any, methods for controlling or regulating the quality of student work or the professional level of teachers. As a byproduct of this understanding of education and teaching, teacher work hours were unreasonably raised and, as a result, the number of subjects, specialties and fields were also increased-essentially to fill teacher hour requirements.

For the Ministry of Education and Science it is important align all documents regulating the organization of educational process with modern Western standards. We give more time for teachers and students, which they can manage themselves. However, this process comes into conflict with the established practice and psychological inertia of university management and of most teachers. People want changes but are unwilling to do what it takes to implement those changes on their own.

Similarly, the Ministry made the decision to abolish the compulsory subjects list, an act that evoked large amounts of opposition from some stakeholders in the educational system. This "mandatory" list of 34 university courses remained in Ukraine from Soviet times- only their names were changed. Today, universities have to form their own educational programs; they determine how and what they teach to their students. The Ministry encourages universities to feel free and embrace the opportunities and growth that autonomy brings. Universities often respond: yes, we will be autonomous, but we need your orders and relevant guidelines. The Ministry now works on creating the policies that will serve to guide such universities through the understandably confusing transition period to a new level of autonomy.

Which brings me to another example where the new law "On Higher Education" has moved forward. This law has led to the creation of several new independent Ministry bodies, which did not exist before. Among them is the National Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education. As the election of those who would serve on the agency's board was corrupted, I did not recognize its results and its activities are still blocked. We plan to come out of this difficult situation by amending the existing law "On Higher education", in particular through the detailed description of election procedure and the clear definition of requirements for candidates.

The implementation of the university autonomy project is possible only with the support of the entire academic community, namely universities. We encourage the activity of university communities, which we see as a unity of students, teachers and staff; We support strengthened student government and the introduction of special training programs. A good example of this is the training project for Ukrainian university management that starts in conjunction with Leadership Foundation for Higher Education, with the support of the British Council.

I would like to mention our attention to the development of the English language, which is crucial for increasing the global competitiveness not only of Ukrainian education and science, but also the Ukrainian state. In 2015 the Ministry organized a national project of English Summer School for all secondary schools, involving both Ukrainian and international volunteers. I express sincere gratitude to the British Council for providing valuable methodological assistance.

The government will soon adopt a special program for the English language that will take place over the course of the next three years. The number of hours for teaching it at school has been increased, new demands on the level of speaking English have been made for school and university graduates, as well as for scientists.

There is also something I find interesting in the English language that I think is one of the examples of how English can serve to enrich and expand Ukrainian perceptions of the world in which we live. I'd like you to consider the word "public" as it exists in the English language.

Public is derived from the Latin, "Publicus," meaning people. In the English language, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, "public" refers to "the people or community as a whole" and when used as an adjective, it refers to that which concerns or affects "the people or community as a whole." Thus you find constructions like "public funds," "public spaces," and the "public good." Civil servants endeavor to serve "the public." The state exists as a systemic "public servant," carrying out the needs and wants of the "public."

In Ukrainian, you find that the idea of "public" exists in a kind of dual state. Indeed, this duality is apparent at both the lexical level and the conceptual level. In Ukrainian we have two words Державний, meaning state, and суспільний, meaning social or public. When the government provides funding, it is perceived as "state funding," not being understood as synonymous to "public funding"- funding for the people. Rather, that which resides in the sphere of суспільний, the public, seems to exist in an almost separate space, unrelated to the state.

Indeed, while this example is less about lexicon and more about perception, there is something that occurs in the formulation of ideas and concepts when a new language is brought into a field of knowledge. Indeed, linguists Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf suggested that language can shape thought. Now, I am not here to determine the specific merits or complexities of such an argument at this time, but in my experience with the idea of the word "public" in relation to the Ukrainian understanding of the same word with two derivations Державний and суспільний suggests that learning a new language, at the very least, opens up the mind to reconsider something that was otherwise fixed. Like the role of the public and the state, and their relationship to each other.

In our endeavor to shape ideas, we also hope to change the mentality that exists about what post-soviet leadership looks like. As it stands, leadership means a charismatic individual from whom all laws flow and who is the unipolar center of power and decision-making. Ideally, we would like to replace this understanding with a new one: one in which there exists a more democratic mechanism of leadership where teams play a more central role in both government and educational development.

By incorporating new terminology, like the English language, we provide a new space from which ideas can be developed and changed, one that is largely detached from old understandings. In this way, we can begin to stop using the familiar words "state" and "society" in a way that delineates them as separate entities in which "State" agencies have their own interests that are different from the "public" interest. We can bring the relationship between the state and the public closer together as the state begins to be understood as an arm of the public which seeks to serve their needs. In much the same

way, we can begin to change the understanding of a leader and the relationship between leadership and those whom it serves. Which brings me to what is still left to do in the reform of Ukrainian education.

Our next important task is the internationalization of Ukrainian universities. In Ukraine it is still widely believed that Ukraine may develop its own internal national quality standards without looking to global requirements of the modern university in order to help shape them. This is a big mistake because Ukrainian universities must be included in the process of global competition. Any other position would mean a conscious or unconscious desire for isolation, which is particularly dangerous in our times.

Ukrainian universities still cannot compete internationally because their structure does not meet modern challenges and requirements. Since Soviet times it has been believed that universities are for studying and research should take place within the National Academy of Sciences, which today brings together 178 research institutes and has 19.3 thousand researches. Therefore, promoting the bill “On science and research,” in particular, is aimed at changing the structure of Ukrainian universities and research infrastructure. Two weeks ago this draft law was approved by the Ukrainian Parliament. We plan to create a National Council for the development of science and technology that will form a national policy of research. This will also serve to establish a National Research Fund. We want to integrate education and science, bringing together universities and research institutes, creating joint master’s and PhD programs, as well as a special grants policy.

There is a separate challenge for the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine – an undeclared war and its consequences. Today we have 1.5 million people who moved from the occupied by Russia territories of Crimea and Donbas. More than 50 thousand children of temporary internal migrants completed their last academic year in schools in different regions of Ukraine. We have evacuated 16 universities and 10 research institutes from the occupied territories.

A separate important part of Ministry activity is the fight against plagiarism and other forms of academic dishonesty. For the first time in the history of independent Ukraine each meeting of the Certifying Board of the Ministry of Education and Science finishes with degree deprivation of some members of the academic community in whose works plagiarism has been found. Now it is important to encourage intolerance of academic dishonesty in the scientific community, whilst teaching the skills necessary to write rigorous academic works, conduct research, and to cite the sources from which these ideas come. This endeavor must not only focus on the punitive aspect of academic integrity but it must also teach and encourage integrity in our academic institutions.

We were able to slightly move towards ensuring financial autonomy of Ukrainian universities and research institutions. Beginning in 2015, universities have the right to open their own bank accounts and place the money that they earn as institutions into these accounts. This is only the first step, which is essential. Before this, universities were served only by the State Treasury and they had to negotiate each transaction with the State. We believe that universities should have full financial autonomy, regardless of public or private origin of the funds which they use and this is the direction that Ministry policy is taking. Along with this, it is important to have full transparency and accountability in the use of funds. All major financial documents of institutions of higher education now available on-line.

Finally, I would like to draw attention to another necessary component of a university. It is also a free platform from which any independent intellectual may express any opinion. In this way, universities have a lot in common with the media. Our basic bill “On Education” makes clear that education is the main priority of state policy. I hope this idea will soon be realized through a list of specific measures and indicators of success.

If I am to leave with you one idea, it is that Ukraine is not lacking in its capacity to reform and develop. Ukraine may be a post-Soviet state, but it also a state where the Revolution of Dignity was able to take root and drive political changes and the growth of a new and robust civil society. While it is possible to choose a date in which we commemorate the beginning and the end of the EuroMaidan Revolution, isolating a date and time in which reform begins and ends is not so easy. Sometimes reform is a process, not an event. Reform in Ukraine is happening, but there are obstacles that need to be overcome and mentalities that need to be informed by the realities of our world and what that means for our country.

Ukraine is full of well-educated people who are ready to make the transformation that we are trying to enact. Bills are passing through Parliament that will further align Ukraine with international standards and will position us to contribute to a world that is changing more rapidly than ever before. Ukrainian education is a part of that change, and the policies that we are creating will contribute to the strengthening of Ukrainian education and, by extension, Ukraine and the world it will increasingly contribute to.

1. Corruption in higher education. – Democratic initiatives . – Kyiv , 2011: http://www.dif.org.ua/modules/pages/files/1345098675_1911.pdf
2. Ukrainian student academic culture : key factors of the formation and development. – Kharkiv Karazin National University, East Ukrainian Foundation of Social Research , International Foundation “Renaissance” (Soros). – Kyiv, 2015. – P. 34.