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The Essence and Content of Integration Processes in the Belarusian System of Education

Abstract. The article deals with the integration processes taking place in the education system of the Republic of Belarus which, in its modern form dates back to 1997 and the signing of an agreement to equalize the education system across member states of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and, more recently, to the Bologna Declaration and the country's accession to the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) in 2015. The CIS agreement formed the basic model of integration of the Belarusian education system while inclusion in the EHEA programme, along with the advances in Information Technology (IT) that have occurred over the past two decades, has greatly broadened its scope. The article discusses the essence and content of integration processes in the global education space; their purpose, function, structure, application and benefits they bring to furthering education both within national borders and internationally. The article goes on to detail the model of integration of the Belarusian education system that interfaces with other member states of the CIS.

Keywords: integration; process of integration; educational system; degree; mobility; CIS; educational space

Introduction

Changes of an educational paradigm happen during sociocultural changes in various states and accordingly fresh pedagogical ideas and concepts are needed to define new public consciousness, new type of culture, new principles of scientific

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thinking and practical activities in the educational space. The efficiency of such sociocultural changes depends on how capable the education system is in terms of adapting to change.

The global process of transition from an industrial to an information led society, along with the social and economic changes occurring in Belarus, have demanded transformation in many fields of state activity – not least in the system of education. The national concept of educational development focuses on the application of new progressive concepts in the teaching and educational process including the latest pedagogical technologies and scientific and methodical achievements; the creation of a new system of information support in education, and the country's entry into a transcontinental system of computer information.

Integration and development

Development of the educational system is needed in order to bring the Republic of Belarus to a point where it can benefit from the emergence of new cross-border opportunities for sharing and updating the content of training and methods of teaching disciplines, and the dissemination of knowledge; expand access to all levels of education thus enabling a large number of young people to realize academic ambitions (including those unable to study in higher educational institutions in their traditional form because of financial or physical constraints, marriage, employment, or remoteness from larger cities where the majority of major educational institutions are located); realization of a system of continuous education that extends from secondary school level through to postgraduate studies and beyond.

Meeting these objectives is of course impossible without the creation of a system of information support incorporating the necessary infrastructure, hardware and software resources needed to efficiently unite educational facilities across the nation. Technology plays a major part in this process enabling the creation, transfer and preservation of teaching materials, and the organization, management and maintenance of the education system itself to be accomplished by means of telecommunication (Belogurov, 2012).

The characteristics of such a system are: flexibility, modularity, parallelism, limitlessness, affordability, technological effectiveness, social equality, internationality, teacher subjectivity and didactic security.

The **flexibility** and hence applicability of technologies in all spheres and in all disciplines is one of the crucial points. Another is **modularity**, the existence of separate information blocks, modules, for the simplification of access to a comprehensive and constantly updated range of information resources. **Parallelism** enables the possibility of simultaneous access to the same resources from any location national or global, while **limitlessness** provides unfettered use of information resources to an

unlimited number of participants involved in the educational process, as well as to researchers.

Effective use of the technological resources described and technical means, and the unified submissions of information, use and development of computer modeling have to lead profitably to a decrease in the costs of training specialists.

Affordability is a byproduct of technological effectiveness. Education is a major burden on state expenditure and the efficient use of technology enables substantial savings in educational costs to be achieved, not just in the classroom and in the training of specialist staff, but also within the system's management and administrative structure.

While technological effectiveness provides a tool for reducing the burden of cost, it serves a much wider function in education both in the classroom and out of it. The continuing evolution of information technologies and the software which accompanies it, significantly impacts on education processes. It provides instant access to knowledge libraries, learning materials and online courses of study that can be accessed by anyone from any location at any time. E-learning, as it is so-called, provides **social equality** in that it opens up education to all regardless of location, state of health or social status.

Internationalization provides the opportunity to participate, internationally and on a reciprocal basis, in a range of activities with foreign educational institutions. Among others, this includes pedagogical and student exchange programmes, joint-participation in research projects and the sharing of educational resources. .

Teacher subjectivity expands education and updates the teaching role, transforming the teacher into more of a mentor/consultant who coordinates the information process and constantly improves courses in order to improve creative activity and skills in pace with innovation.

The key to **Didactic security** lays in attracting the best faculty, investing in up-to-date educational and methodical materials to enable them to do their job efficiently, and introduction of a specialised quality control regime to ensure compliance in meeting desired educational standards.

For integration in a global education network to be successful, it is necessary to utilise in full all scientific and methodical potential at all levels of education. This includes the use of current technologies and information resources, experience in the implementation of distance learning, and a telecommunication infrastructure capable of linking with all higher educational institutions (Dzhurinsky, 2004).

In-country an educational system has to be developed that provides continuity of learning through each stage of the educational process, progressively providing continuous up-to-date information at all levels – primary, secondary (to ordinary level qualification), secondary (to advanced level qualification), vocational training, and higher education (undergraduate to post graduate studies). The system also requires to be democratized granting equal opportunities to all educational

institutions in terms of legal governance, faculty employment, educational and methodical resources, financial accountability, funding, and day-to-day administration. As indicated above, modern telecommunications technology and its attendant infrastructure, provides the hub around which a fully integrated education system functions. It provides a centralized knowledge base incorporating a virtual electronic library, together with the means for conducting remote educational courses and joint-participation projects with other institutions both in-country and internationally. It must complement development of the various forms of education consistent with the state's educational standards, but it must not interfere with the independent activities of educational institutions or undermine the functioning of existing regional centers, other associations of educational institutions and/or their structural divisions, involved in the education process (Liferov, 2005).

Integration is a direct product of globalization that has impacted how we do things in almost all spheres of life. In terms of education specifically, it is directed at the unification of educational systems and pedagogical methods under the principle of "unity in variety" which assumes a community of systems that, while preserving national traits, provide a common platform for the furtherance of education on a global basis.

In this context, and with applicability to all participating states, the process of integration must respect state sovereignty, state equality, respect of human rights and respect of international obligations. It must also tie each state to providing, by way of declaration, the following information:

- the current state of the education system and priorities relating to its development;
- historical experience in the development of education systems and also international experience in this sphere;
- inadmissibility of discrimination in education of every and all kind, but with specific reference to gender, ethnicity, race, colour, religion, disability and social standing;
- any and all shared interstate component(s) in existing state educational standards;
- qualification requirements for mainline subjects and new specialties;
- state policy in education;
- all levels of education available, the duration of training at each level, and types of educational institutions;
- forms of education;
- statutory education documents, their regulatory base and mechanism of establishing equivalence and mutual recognition of certification – general education (ordinary level and advanced level), vocational qualifications, academic degrees and ranks.

The specifics of integration processes in education can be defined as: humanity, democracy, mobility, advancement, openness, continuity, phasing, systematisation, equality, and 'unity in variety' (Onokoy, 2004).

Humanity reflects freedom of choice of each individual and each nation, the right of individuals and nations on self-determination in questions of choice of ways of integration and accession to specific arrangements; all realised through public debate, the collective pronouncement of decisions, the creation of international acts which do not undermine the rights of certain citizens, culminating with the nation states concerned considering features of all and everyone.

Democracy means availability at all levels of education and the participation of all stakeholders in the development of uniform educational norms and installations. At the forefront, equal rights and opportunities in education have to be provided to all citizens in all states and, as mentioned before, regardless of gender, ethnicity, race, colour, religion, disability or social status.

Mobility reflects the way in which the integration process is structured; among others its ease of deployment, its flexibility, and its preparedness for rapid reorganization to meet constantly changing socio-economic requirements. It demands the continuous coordination of actions by state organs and educational institutions, along with intervention where necessary to correct shortcomings and/or improve efficiency.

Advancement is the product of trend analysis, scientific forecasting, and the identification of new opportunities – their potential and outcomes. In essence, it relates to the constant refinement of existing systems and introduction of evolving educational technologies as soon they become available.

Openness assumes unbounded expansion of the education driven by freedom of choice, attraction to the educational sphere of new experts, extension of the list of course subjects and specializations, extended coverage of the events and innovations connected with education in the mass media, and the creation of new educational institutions.

Continuity, simply relates to the principle of integration as an unceasing process of education embodying all of the facets herein described.

Phasing relates to the method of introducing changes to the existing national education system in a series of carefully planned and coordinated stages until a state of full integration into uniform educational space has been achieved.

Systematization refers to bringing together all interrelated elements of the integration processes in a sequential and orderly manner.

Equality provides equal conditions to all parties participating in the integration process.

Unity in variety assumes the implementation of an integration processes that takes into full account the national and regional features of participating parties, it

being necessary to retain all best practices of national education systems. Thus, the general educational space strives for unity in standards, etc.

The CIS integration model

On January 17, 1997 the Council of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) – comprising the heads of government of its member states – approved the concept of introducing a unified general educational system. Belarus, as a founding member of the CIS, was signatory to the Cooperation Agreement subsequently produced and to the Council’s provisions on the reform thereto annexed (The concept of continuous education, 1997).

In essence, these documents were the first regulatory steps to be introduced at the legislative level connected with creating a uniform educational space within the CIS. Practical implementation of the specified documents assumes development of a number of model acts governing the relations in education. The resolution of the Council of Inter-parliamentary Assembly of the CIS dated October 17, 1998 (Resolution No. 45), created a working group to prepare the Model Education Code for the participating states within the CIS which formed the basis for development of the model laws “On Education” adopted by the Inter-parliamentary Committee under cover of Resolution No. 4-11, dated October 11, 1997, and by the Inter-parliamentary Assembly under cover of Resolution No. 13-8, dated April 3, 1999. The primary goal of the Model Education Code was to maximize and collectively use the capacity of CIS member states to satisfy the need of their respective citizenry for access to a centralized system of general education (The concept of continuous education, 1997). In the main this achieved its intended purpose. It regularized general education across state borders and brought a measure of continuity to the education process that hitherto had not wholly been present.

It should be noted, however, that its integration within the international community, which is regulated under the auspices of the United Nations (UN), would require conformity with a number of international acts relating to education that pursue the following:

- harmonization of national educational laws and regulations with those of all UN member states;
- assistance in the integration of education systems of all UN member states;
- regulation concerning relations in the field of education which require to be resolved uniformly;
- assistance in developing the national educational codes of member states;
- coordination of approaches to state educational standards at all levels and certification of educational, scientific and research personnel.

To achieve these goals it would be further necessary to:

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- develop uniform principles of state policy in the field of education, to define the purposes, tasks and priorities of educational development of UN member states;
- establish coordinated education levels, the durations of education at each level and the main types of educational institutions involved, taking into consideration the existing character of each participating nation's education system;
- establish uniform basic education provisions in legislation in the field of education that provide for the academic and professional mobility of citizens of each respective state;
- define the legal status of the educational institutions involved including the training level of educational staff;
- develop a mechanism for the establishment of equivalence and mutual recognition of documents in respect of general education certificates, academic degrees and ranks;
- provide mobility and free access to educational institutions in any country in the world community;
- coordinate an order of licensing, certification and accreditation of educational institutions worldwide;
- create a uniform system of information support;
- create a uniform scientific forum open to all member states.

The internationalization of education is characterized by a number of principles of state education policy: the coherence of educational standards; programs and education levels; standard terms of training at each level; provisions and requirements for the preparation and certification of teaching, scientific and research personnel, equal opportunities and free realization of the rights of citizens for education in the public educational institutions in the territory of all states.

The Cooperation Agreement signed by the member states of the CIS in Moscow, in 1997, subdivided educational programs into two categories – general education and professional (The concept of the model Educational Code for State Parties of the CIS, Moscow, 1997). Education at all levels has a material impact on an individual's future and therefore has to be structured so as to satisfy the needs of citizens throughout life. For this to be successful, related education legislation has to incorporate mechanisms that establish a partnership between students' and the educational system, with both the state and society recognizing that an educated population constitutes a national resource essential to the country's future. In fact one could go as far as to say that education itself constitutes a strategic resource given that ultimately, the welfare and development of society is dependent on the outcome of its labours. Thus, state policy should at all times prioritise development of the education system to maximize its efficiency for the better good. Likewise,

the faculty and managers of teaching institutions, should use their best endeavours to provide students with the highest level of education achievable. Education is a major social function of the state and as such is an effective instrument in serving the country's economic growth and transformations (The concept of the model Educational, 1997).

Worth mentioning here, because it endorses the foregoing, is that some time ago a consensus of opinion was aired globally that economic progress of a country is determined by how the state develops its education systems, educates its citizens and readies expertise at all levels. It led to revaluation and revision of the role education plays in society, which in turn led to the belief that "human capital" expressed in terms of knowledge, ability, creativity and spirituality of the people, becomes the most effective factor of production. Therefore, education has to be seen as a priority field of state activity and as such a favorable investment in terms of future employment and economic security.

The integration of education systems into a uniform educational space promotes intensive development of education in each country party to the process. For reasons already mentioned this is necessary both in the interests of the state, and in the interests of society, as well as for the individual who has inalienable rights – the right to an education, the right to work and the right to a future. Also of course, it serves to increase the prestige of the pedagogical profession in society which in turn promotes the interest of individuals to take up teaching posts.

Uniformity is the keynote of this article and necessarily so because every aspect of the integration process relates to the introduction of common standards. This is particularly relevant to the structure of educational courses and in the context of the education plan practiced by Belarus under its arrangement with the CIS, the key elements involved can be identified as following:

- content of state educational standards at each level, profile of study subjects and conditions for their realisation;
- statement of appropriate educational programmes and requirements in respect of content and level of student training applicable to each programme;
- education level of the student(s) accepted for training;
- standard terms of assimilation of programmes for different forms of education relevant to applicable labour standards;
- requirements relevant to personnel, educational methodology, and material support of the educational process;
- approach to controlling the level of knowledge of student trainees at all grade levels and subsequent certification.

In the CIS the following educational levels are established:

- main general education (9-10 years);
- secondary (full) general education (11-12 years);

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- primary professional education (1-3 years);
- secondary professional education (2-4 years);
- higher education (4-6 years – depending on subject course duration);
- postgraduate professional education (3-4 years);
- doctoral studies (3-4 years) (Concept of social development, 2002, p. 12).

In different states public and private educational institutions work side-by-side. Private educational institutions can be created in accordance with organizational and legal norms provided for in national legislation, which simplifies the process of integration.

To ensure the academic and professional mobility of individuals across national borders, provision is necessary to acquire a much broader study of languages and cultures. This is of particular importance in relation to active student/teacher exchange programmes as well as to successful participation in cross-border academic research projects. Likewise, it also plays an important role in situations where educational institutions having interstate status, open a branch facility in another member state's territory. It is to be reminded here, that the common language of science today is English.

Across the member states of the CIS, identical forms of education are established. These include: intramural and extramural, correspondence courses, remote learning (typically E-learning); family education, self-education, and other forms of external study. The combination of various forms of education is allowed. For all forms of education within a specific main educational or main professional educational programme, are governed by state standards. As established under intergovernmental agreement by the CIS, certain professions and specialties are subject to intramural and extramural study only at recognized institutions; correspondence courses and other forms of external study is not permitted.

Statutory education levels and their intended function are imposed on all member states. These are itemized as following:

- *Preschool education*: provides development of the child taking into account age and specific features, and preparedness for secondary comprehensive education at subsequent levels.
- *General secondary education*: most children start school at the age of 6, and are required to follow a basic education curriculum up to the age of 15. Those who complete basic education successfully can, if they so chose, apply to a high school, college or professional technical institution to complete their education and obtain either a high school certificate or professional certificate. The vast majority of students opt to stay on at school until the age of 18 for this purpose.

- *Higher education*: is open to all students in possession of a high school or professional certificate who can then apply for admission to a university to continue their education.
- *Postgraduate education*: provides for optimal development of the intellectual and creative potential of individuals capable of pursuing a high-level career particularly in STEM subjects, research and education.
- *Inclusive education*: has to provides access to education to individuals with special educational needs, providing them with the specialized services necessary to ensure their social adaptation and integration into society.
- *Supplementary education*: (out-of-school, extracurricular, etc..) is encouraged to provide both children and youth with equal access to various areas of creative activity, that have the potential to satisfy needs for moral, intellectual and physical development, professional self-determination or formation of a healthy lifestyle.
- *Further education*: (typically conducted at evening or weekend classes, through correspondence courses or by E-learning) is predominantly aimed at adults already in the workplace. It relates to professional development and/ or retraining allowing individuals the opportunity to improve or expand their professional skills, either to better prepare them to adapt in an ever changing social and economic environment, or to obtain an additional specialty.

The policy in development of state educational standards is largely based on the overall aspirations of CIS member states in relation to providing academic mobility for students and equal opportunities for the cross-border employment of experts and scientific staff, along with the recognition of existing levels of education, respective periods of training and the model state documents in place. Educational institutions having state accreditation and who administrate general education (except preschool) and professional educational programs, are authorized to issue a General Education Certificate (a state model document) to all students who have satisfactorily passed their final examinations at the appropriate level of education.

The general education certificate is a necessary condition for continuing education at a subsequent level, if no other certificate is provided by the charter of the relevant educational institution. Academic degrees specified in the state model qualification documents as well as other documents relating to postgraduate professional education, on award by an accredited higher education institution, grant the holder the right to be engaged in a professional activity relevant to the discipline studied, including the right to hold positions for which obligatory qualification requirements to the corresponding educational qualification are in compliance with the established procedure defined (Concept of social development, 2002).

As a regulatory base for establishing the equivalence of general education certificates, academic degrees and ranks, the state model of such documents is

not perhaps an ideal solution, however, it has to be adopted. Such documents are included in bilateral and multilateral agreements between CIS member states on the equivalence and recognition of documents and therefore it is essential they be retained.

In the unified system of information, the coordinated structure of data and knowledge bases has to work and work efficiently; each state bears responsibility for the obligatory submission of information on a regular basis by completion of a questionnaire. All member states party to the agreement are required to administrate legislative regulations in the field of education. For this purpose each state must appoint a national codification commission on education rights which reports to the Coordination Codification Commission of the Council for cooperation in the field of education of the State Parties of the CIS, as well as to the appropriate authority of the United Nations, where applicable.

Conclusion

All aforesaid is aimed at providing the harmonization of national legislation and regulations in the field of education for the formation and development of a uniform educational space resulting in academic and professional mobility; the recognition and equivalence of educational certificates, academic degrees and ranks, and assistance in the integration of educational systems. The creation of a uniform educational space spanning international borders is a worthy cause for cultivating intelligence, nurturing cultural traditions and spirituality enriching the people of the countries that make up the global community.

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