

CIVIC

When you cheat, you will be cheated

By: Daliborka Uljarevic

There is a huge gap between what this oldest academic institution in the country should be and what it is, and an even bigger gap between our and European education. This will be one of the first chapters we will negotiate with EU. Is somebody thinking about this already, or will we just try to think of some way to cover it up once it is put on the table?

The first anniversary of the parliamentary elections in which the coalition “European Montenegro” won once again is fast approaching. For the sake of development of our political memory, let us take a look at the rich campaign offer. Much was promised, generously and temptingly as it is only done when you’re not planning to make good on your promises.

Let us dwell a little on education, as one of the main pillars of the society. This is the best illustration of the lack of vision on the part of the decision makers, i.e. the consequences of their own lack of education and abundance of provincial limitations.

The election programme, which was hard to come by even during the campaign, expresses the conviction that “education is the foundation of our overall development”, which is something we can all agree on. It further says that “we have done a lot to reform the educational system. By introducing European curricula and new technologies into our classrooms, we are creating a knowledge society. In line with the new developmental needs, we are investing in professionals, sponsoring talented students, promoting competition in all areas, and continuing with investments in modern educational infrastructure...”

Rector of the University of Montenegro (UCG) recently said that “the main priority of UCG is to preserve the continuity of instruction”! There is no mention any more of investments in science, scientific resources or students. And it’s no wonder, as in the buildings of the technical faculties the heating is turned off every morning at 10 am, in reading rooms and in the hallway which is sort of a study space as well as it has access to wireless internet. Or, when the Academy of Arts postpones the beginning of the semester by a month in order to save on electricity bills. These are only some of the most recent examples of the lack of minimum working conditions and funding at UCG.

State’s policy towards education, especially higher education, can also be gauged through the budget. In the last 8 years the UCG received between 2.03% and 2.55% of the national budget, while 0.12% to 0.32% were invested in science. To put it into perspective, in 2008 Ministry of Defense was given 48 million EUR, while UCG received 16.3 million. The neglect of science and research is best illustrated by the fact that in 2010 the entire budget for science will be 0.26% of the national budget, while a single cultural establishment – Montenegrin National Theatre – will receive 0.37%. National theatre *is* important, but it is irresponsible from a state to put it ahead of innovation, support for young scientists, research and continuous education of UCG cadre on its list of priorities. European norm for investment into science is around 3%, and some more prosperous states, such as Sweden, allocate as much as 4.3% of their budget, while our more accessible benchmark, Croatia, gives 1.3%. These numbers show very well how far we are from the EU in systemic terms, which is much more important than these formal steps which we ran through, and, euphoric with the ease of our progress, started thinking that we’re almost in EU.

On top of these scandalously low investments in science and higher education in Montenegro, the little investment that exists is spent without aim and transparency. This endangers the very quality of education, which is already at staggeringly low levels, as well as the overall societal development, and fosters an atmosphere in which what we know is less important than who we know. We rely on family, party and other connections, instead of working to bring about a system of values where only knowledge will bring us titles. Nor is UCG itself trying very hard to improve its standing in the society. Its leaders are more dedicated to covering up their financial dealings and denying existence of corruption (from distribution of housing, loans and teaching credits to the grading system, employment etc.), accompanied with a worrying degradation of the quality of staff, which is also due to strong political and other, equally inappropriate for this institution, influences which discourage the best from coming to or remaining at UCG.

Some sections of the latest UCG Bulletin open up the question: what is being financed by UCG and what does UCG produce? It should be a cause of concern that out of 21 organisational units (departments) there are 11 which have less than 5 full professors, three of them don't have a single one, and two departments have neither full nor associate professors! We are talking of departments which at the moment have 9.332 students, and one of them is the oldest in the country – Faculty of Economics, which currently has 5 full professors and 4.227 students.

A few days ago I talked to a student who shared his dilemma with me: if he goes for a graduate programme abroad, he is afraid that UCG will not appreciate his diploma, but he knows well enough that there are limits to what he can learn at his department and, as every young person, he would like to acquire better, more up to date knowledge.

A friend of my who has two MAs from prestigious universities and recently got her PhD from one of three most famous universities in the world was never contacted by anybody from UCG, and it's not like they had difficulties identifying her as a serious potential. She already taught her first semester at one of the four worlds' most famous universities, which managed to recognise her abilities, although they probably never heard of UCG.

There is a huge gap between what this oldest academic establishment in the country should be and what it is, and an even bigger gap between our and European education. This will be one of the first chapters we will negotiate with EU. Is somebody thinking about this already, or will we just try to think of some way to cover it up once it is put on the table?

Still, I want to believe that this student will come back from studying abroad to face the petty complexes of those who now seem powerful and able to limit his thirst for knowledge. I want to believe that my friend will not give her knowledge only to the students at foreign universities, even if that proves that her quality is unquestionable, but that our students will also have the chance to learn from the best, such as her.

For that to happen, we must insist on changes: in the state policy towards UCG, but also in UCG itself. For starters, UCG could spend its own budget more responsibly and more rationally, in order to avoid repeating the entries from the Financial Plan 2009, which shows that while 11.000 EUR were spent on acquiring scientific literature, 15.000 went on printing diplomas. Since those diplomas, in spite of the special paper and holograms, will not be worth anything.

The author is executive director of Centre for Civic Education.