

South West University: WPI in the competition for students

What does this case study demonstrate?

[South West University 'Neophyte Rilsky'](#) is an organisation which uses WPI practices as a cost effective tool to face the highly competitive environment in the higher education sector in Bulgaria. Identified practices emerged bottom-up, received the support by the management and contributed to more autonomy and flexibility, which proved to be highly valued by employees. The WPI practices adopted in the University are mostly related to changes in the organisational methods in the implementation of the university's main activities and the workplace organisation. Two of the three innovations identified by the interviewed manager and employees are related to the organisation of and approach to the communication of the respective teams with their direct managers. The promotion of professional and personal development of the staff is considered another innovative practice.

Workplace innovation elements: work organisation; learning and reflection; workplace partnership

Context

The South-West University is a state institution with more than 800 teaching staff that offers training in Bulgarian and English in more than 60 Bachelor's, 80 Master's and 40 specialised PhD programmes. Its faculties include Law and History, Natural Science and Mathematics, Economics, Public Health and Sport, Pedagogy, Philology, Philosophy, Arts, and a Technical College. The institution provides training in different scientific fields for about 14000 students of whom 700 are international students coming from various countries such as Greece, Turkey, Cyprus, Serbia, Albania, Moldova, Ukraine, Russia, Japan, Pakistan, Yemen etc. Located in Blagoevgrad, the economic, cultural and educational centre of South-Western Bulgaria, the University is situated 90 km from Sofia, 20 km from the border with Macedonia and 80 km from the Greek border. Its location naturally facilitates the academic cooperation with a number of universities in the Balkan region.

Description of WPI practices

Workplace autonomy

Within the university a large part of the organisation of the administration is based on the so called self-managing teams of 3 to 6 people that are set up to tackle a particular issue or reach a predefined objective – e.g. implementation of new IT tool for work and document flow. This is a system of organisation of day-to-day duties and activities. This approach ensures that the team members will have sufficient flexibility to decide how to implement their tasks taking into account their own capacities and time schedule. In the words of interviewed employees 'when solving issues at work, we have flexibility, which, according to me, is an innovative method to complete tasks.'

Meetings of consent

The meetings of consent are weekly round table discussions of the administrative staff and the management of the Educational Activities Directorate with the occasional ad hoc participation of the academic staff. In many cases a professor from the academic staff occupies also a (managerial) position in the administration of the University. 'In the Directorate the environment changes constantly. This urges the necessity to always look for solutions of issues that arise during the work process; in this regard, our novelties are so to say organisational and managerial rather than a product. Our product is to provide good quality education'. Employees can make suggestions and give ideas on how to solve issues that come up in the working process. The aim of the meetings is to consider all possible options for solving a certain problem, discuss the proposed solutions, and take a joint decision on how to proceed. The meetings can also involve members of other university departments should the need arise.

Lifelong learning

The university offers a good-quality infrastructure and a variety of classes for the continuous personal and professional development of the staff. Lifelong learning is promoted and supported at the University. 'We could say this is a permanent process – it is either projects financed by the Operational Programmes or initiative of the managerial staff – courses in English or other courses which might be of interest to the staff'. The administrative staff have the opportunity to continue their education pursuing master's or PhD programmes at the university. Various training courses are provided, such as classes in English, and in computer skills. In addition, the new sport centre can be used by all members of the university staff and the members of the faculty, as well as by students. Different classes are organised, for example in dancing and sport.

So who benefits?

Voice and flexibility: Employees value highly that 'the environment at the workplace is fruitful for stirring your ambition to go forward. Taking part in decision making, being able to propose innovative methods to solve problems, motivates people. The environment is more flexible, more interesting when implementing innovative practices, which stimulates us further.'

Learning opportunities: 'There are always ongoing courses for increasing the capacity and qualifications of the university staff and the faculty members'. Apart from increasing employee engagement and motivation a senior expert in the Scientific Projects Department also highlights that 'improving the qualifications of the staff and the faculty members reflects on the education of the students. The faculty members use innovative methods in their work which makes the lectures more interesting and appealing for the students.'

More sustainability of the organisation: There is a shared understanding among interviewed employees and head of units that 'nowadays everything changes so fast and there is great competition' and that 'Innovations, including ones related to the workplace, are necessary condition for increasing the organisational competitiveness.'

Prognosis

One of the most significant motivations for the university management, as well as the university staff to seek new ways of improving their performance is the fierce competition with other Bulgarian universities and the continuing trend of Bulgarian students pursuing their studies in foreign universities. Considering

that the major part of the state financing of the universities depends on the number of students enrolled in university's programmes, being able to attract students is vital for universities. If South West University is to keep its competitive position on the Bulgarian and regional educational landscape, the institution will have to remain innovative and open to new ideas coming from within.