Visiting Advisor's Report

International Institute of Labour and Social Relations
Minsk, Belarus
December 13-18, 1998

Team Members: Elizabeth Bibby, Program Assistant, Universities Project; Larry Leslie, Professor, Center for the Study of Higher Education, University of Arizona; Helmut Schramke, Project director, Logistics Center, University of Vienna; Sheila Slaughter, Professor, Center for the Study of Higher Education, University of Arizona

Introduction

The visiting advisors would like to begin by thanking the rectorate, faculty and students of the International Institute of Labour and Social Relations (hereafter IILSR) for their hospitality during the inaugural Visiting Advisors Program site visit held in December, 1998. Special thanks must be extended to Prof. Vladimir Grabaourov, Chair of the Department of Information Technologies; Mrs. Svetlana Novikova, Dean of the Department for Preparatory Study and International Students Exchange; Dr. Tatiana Rousetskaya, Dean of Foreign Economic Relations and International Law; and Elina Sharkova, Head of the International Department. Numerous other faculty members and students participated in the four day visit.

Agenda Process and Schedule

The visiting team was invited to the IILSR to advise in four areas:

- Administration and Finance;
- Academic Structure;
- Student Needs and the Role of Students in Institutional Affairs;
- Information Technology and its use.

Over the four day consultation, the visiting advisors met with representatives of the IILSR administration, faculty and students in informal (5-8 person) chats, larger (10-15 person) discussion groups and "lecture" settings (composed of both students and faculty), in which the team addressed the main areas of interest expressed by the IILSR and fielded questions on a variety of issues ranging from student life to academic structure and curricula in Europe and the United States.

Additionally, the advisors met with IILSR alumni working for two Minsk businesses: the "Atlant" refrigerator plant and "Alto Lan" Local Area Networking and Communications company.

Although the various meetings were not highly structured (i.e. were not always assigned a specific theme) they allowed for wide ranging discussions on various topics, and in this way helped the team gain a more accurate picture of both the internal and external circumstances affecting the IILSR.

The International Institute of Labour and Social Relations and Higher Education in Belarus

The IILSR represents a very important element in the reform of higher education in Belarus. Founded in 1992 using the assets and some personnel of the former training and research center of the Belarusian Trade Unions Federation, this non-state institution was one of the founding members of the Association of Non-State Educational Institutions and continues to play a leading role in this organization. Despite a declining economy and ant-reformist policies of the Belarusian government, the IILSR is committed to improving the quality of its academic programs and institutional management. The IILSR has 170 employees and 800 students, each of whom pays between USD 600-900 per year in tuition. In addition to its main branch in Minsk, the IILSR has branches in Gomel, Vitebsk and Pinsk.

After an initial period of reform, the declining Belarusian economy resulted in considerable anti-reform actions by the government and, even more fundamentally, in the attitudes of people about reform. The IILSR appears to be one of the few surviving reform elements in Belarusian higher education.

Administration and Finance

The IILSR has a business plan. However, it was developed in the pre-1997 period, and changes in the government and the general economic climate of Belarus have made the plan less appropriate for the present time. The IILSR needs to refine this plan—in particular, the IILSR needs to develop information technology for the management of the enterprise, i.e. data on tuition pricing, enrollment management, course taking patterns. At present, the IILSR does not utilize computers for purposes of institutional management.

Academic Structure

The IILSR is composed of two main parts. First is the *management school*. Students of the management school study for four and one-half years, although soon this period will be extended to five years. The management school's main strength is its orientation to the market. The second main part of the school is the *trade union retraining program.* Through short courses, this program is designed to instruct Trade Union officials in modern management practices. Although the IILSR no longer receives funding from the Trade Unions, it is still obligated to finance this retraining. Presently, the IILSR is supported almost completely by student fees.

The IILSR's desire for increased international contact is underscored by its keen interest in the Universities Project and the Visiting Advisors Program. International exchange (of both faculty and students) is seen as a means by which the IILSR can expose faculty to western modes of management and instruction and students to Cultures that, ten years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, remain relatively unknown inside Belarus.

Student Needs and the Role of Students in Institutional Affairs

What is greatly needed for students at the IILSR is a new approach to teaching. This should take place in two simultaneous steps. These steps are (a) new methods of teaching in the class room (new methods of pedagogy) and (b) new methods of management (subject matter/curricula). The new methods of instruction to be developed should focus on ice breaking in the class room so that a problem-centered curriculum that makes use of case studies can be developed. The approach should be developed in an interactive mode, drawing conceptualization and practice more closely together. Controls should be built into the new approach to teaching—controls that involve testing, evaluation and continuous feedback.

Sending IILSR faculty abroad is one way to introduce new teaching methods. In this way, IILSR faculty can study and practice new methods of teaching which they can then implement in the classroom and introduce to other faculty.

Another student need that was identified was use of the internet to broaden contact with other countries. Currently, internet use is difficult, due to a state monopoly over provision, but more internet providers may emerge in the near future. Once the technical problems are solved, the IILSR needs to designate a person to be the point of access for student use of the internet. That person needs to collect information about educational opportunities abroad, about interactive methods of pedagogy, about new trends in management education, new trends in management of higher education and appropriate conferences and seminars abroad in which students may participate. The person who is the internet interface should not control access, to the net (indeed, the more students with access to the net, the better) but should expand and expedite students' connection to information important to them.

Information Technology and its use

The IILSR has excellent technology—computers, printers, multimedia, etc. However, it lacks quick and reliable internet access (see above) and software. The IILSR very much wants to utilize up-to-date western software, but has difficulty paying for such products.

The IILSR also wants to develop information technology for its own management practices. To do that, the IILSR needs software, and, perhaps more importantly, exposure to the full range of sophisticated management practices used in western post-secondary education. Delivery of such information could be developed in several ways:

- Through faculty exchange, in which IILSR faculty attended a higher education program in the west, and had an internship with an institutional research office, then adopted these practices to meet the needs of the IILSR;
- Through making journals, books and articles that deal with these subjects available to IILSR faculty and administrators;
- Through using the internet to locate such information, and perhaps corresponding with the Western experts on these topics via email.

Conclusions

The IILSR should be commended for the progress it has made in creating a private institute of management. Even over the course of the (admittedly short) four day consultation, the external circumstances which challenge positive educational reform in Belarus were clearly evident. Despite such challenges, the IILSR is moving toward positive change. Plans for aid in curriculum reform, technology use and academic exchange are already underway between the University of Vienna and the IILSR. It is the intent of the visiting advisors that the suggestions offered and ties formed—indeed are still being formed—between Belarusian, Austrian and American individuals and institutions, will enable the IILSR to better implement change—in all facets of the institution.