Donors reducing grants for study abroad

By KATERINA SIRNYOK

Education Abroad

Despite a marked decrease in grant money offered by international donor organizations, more Ukrainian students are looking to study abroad, motivated by lucrative career possibilities on the Ukrainian job market and encouraged by their ability to pay for their studies themselves.

According to foreign study experts, free educational funds were more abundant in the 1990s, following the breakup of the Soviet Union and Ukraine’s appearance on the world map as a fledgling democracy with a collapsed economy. Now, as the country’s democracy and economy have developed, experts say there is less grant money available for Ukrainians looking to get a higher education overseas.

However, with Ukraine’s emergence as a Western-style economy, the country’s job market has created a growing demand for well-educated and highly skilled employees with graduate and post-graduate degrees, which has galvanized interest in foreign study opportunities, despite the high cost.

European study opportunities

Many educational grants made available to Ukrainians are for study opportunities in Europe.

The largest donor of grants for Europe is the Open Society Institute (OSI), funded by American philanthropist George Soros. At the start of the 1990s, OSI’s network, which supports developing democracies, opened its doors in countries of the former Soviet Union. In Ukraine it operates as the International Renaissance Foundation (IRF).

In the 1990s, IRF offered large grants in both international and national educational development. However, according to IRF educational manager Iryna Ivanovy, today there is no longer any money for national grants.

“At present, the IRF works in Ukraine only as an administrator of national programs, not as a grant supplier,” she said.

IRF seeks grant suppliers in Ukraine.

The situation regarding international IRF grants is different. A separate IRF organization called the International Education Advancing Center (IEAC) was created in 2001. The center works directly with the OSI administering OSI-funded programs to study abroad.

According to Daria Pokhkaleva, IEAC’s Scholarship Programs Coordinator, there are still many grants for Ukrainians to study abroad.

“We administer certain programs,” she said. “One of the most well-known long-term programs is a scholarship at the American University in Bulgaria. It is for four years [at $4,800 per annum].” Pokhkaleva said.

This is the only undergraduate program that we offer, but there are many more graduate and postgraduate grants Oxford, Cambridge, and scholarships for Central European Universities.

Pokhkaleva said the center used to have one more program at Edinburgh University [in Scotland], but it’s no longer available for Ukrainians.

“The center also closed the Soros Supplementary Grants Program [a program that supported Ukrainians who wanted to study in post-Soviet countries], since it wasn’t popular among students.”

A common theme among all the grants, Pokhkaleva said, is that they are all parts of the bigger programs directed at the entire former Soviet Union. There are no scholarships specifically for Ukraine.

Pokhkaleva said that another common feature of the grants is that the application process for receiving them is no cakewalk.

“It’s very complicated. It takes almost a year to go through all the stages. One needs to be the best of the best,” Pokhkaleva said.

“A student has to be an opinion former, a leader and have a strong personality,” she added.

Pokhkaleva said that to be accepted for any of the grants, a graduate must have an average TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) score of 630 out of 677.

“All of the programs are very demanding. And the question of being accepted depends only on the students and how hardworking they are. We had a student who applied for one program for seven years, and finally, he got it.”

American exchange grants

The United States government is also a big provider of educational opportunities for Ukrainians. In 1992, the U.S. Congress passed the Freedom Support Act (FSA) as a funding program aimed at developing democracies in former Soviet states. A large part of the FSA’s funds are applied to educational and cultural exchanges. These exchanges include the Fulbright Leaders Exchange Program, the Peace Corps, for 9th and 10th grade high school students, the Eurasian Undergraduate Exchange Program (UGRAD), the Senator Edward M. Kennedy Graduate Program, and others.

In the 1990s, these programs were largely supported by USAID money, but at present they are funded from other government sources.

Since 2001, total sums spent on educational and cultural exchanges by the U.S. government have decreased fivefold: from $29.19 million in 2001 to $5.64 million in 2005. According to experts in the field, the explanation for the drop is reasonable: democratic reforms are going well in Ukraine, so there is no longer the need to support them as intensively.

Lilia Dolgik, the program officer of the Education Programs Division of the International and Research Board (IREX), the administrator of the UGRAD and Muskie programs, confirmed that the number of Ukrainian participants in exchanges to the U.S. has been on the decline.

This summer [2006], 19 Ukrainians went to the U.S. to study in the Muskie program, and 39 Ukrainian students went to study on the UGRAD program. “If we’re talking about the last three years, the numbers of participants has decreased,” Dolgik said.

“The programs are aimed at developing democracy and democratic society. At this point we want to say that democracy is well developed in Ukraine. Of course, there is always room for improvement, but there are other priorities for the U.S. government at the present time. Other countries need more help to develop their democracies,” she added.

Self-funding education

Despite the overall decrease in donor organization funding available for Ukrainian students to study abroad, the number of Ukrainian students seeking a foreign education, and funding that education themselves, is on the rise.

For example, the number of applicants for OSI graduate programs in the United Kingdom decreased from 262 applicants in the 2004-2005 academic year to 192 in the 2006-2007 academic year, or by 27 percent in that three-year period.

The number of applicants awarded grants fell by 17 percent in the same period, from 22 to 10.

However, at the same time, according to Business Link, an independent Ukrainian educational information company, the number of Ukrainian students who came to the UK to pursue Master’s degrees on an independent basis rose from four students in the 2003-2004 academic year to 10 in 2005-2006. The number of inquiries received by Business Link from Ukrainians seeking a higher education in the UK rose from 300 in 2001 to 980 in 2005.

Valeria Samborska, the head of Business Link’s education department, said that the firm has been operating on the Ukrainian foreign studies market since 1997.

“Each year we see a steady rise in the number of people who want to receive an education abroad. Master’s degree programs are more in demand than undergraduate programs because four years of study abroad is still a little too expensive for Ukrainians. Graduate programs lasting from one to two years are more affordable,” Samborska said.

“AT PRESENT, THE IRF WORKS IN UKRAINE ONLY AS AN ADMINISTRATOR OF NATIONAL PROGRAMS, NOT AS A GRANT SUPPLIER.”

— IRYA PANYUK

Ukrainian students are increasingly seeking a higher education abroad. They are not even put off by instances when foreign education standards, both European and American, are not accepted in Ukraine.

According to Pokhkaleva, to be able to use a doctoral degree in Ukraine, one can only earn it in this country. She said that even with a PhD from Oxford University, one would not be considered as being the equivalent of a PhD in Ukraine and get employment on that basis.