

Tajik Media Short of Journalists

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Universities lack the modern teaching methods to turn out high-calibre graduates to work as journalists. Tajikistan has plenty of media outlets – at least 380 of them at the latest count – but almost all are short of staff. One major reason for this is that university journalism courses are under-funded and use old-fashioned teaching methods, and are failing to produce enough graduates with the skills to slot into the vacancies.

Concerned at the staff shortages, the media community is looking at ways to improve the training now available, which they say is outdated and short of tutors, modern equipment and even textbooks.

GAPS IN JOURNALISM TRAINING

Participants in a roundtable meeting held in the capital Dushanbe at the beginning of April agreed that university courses do not meet modern requirements, that there are fewer and fewer professional journalists working in the media, and that there is little cooperation between media organisations and universities.

The meeting brought together the heads of journalism faculties and departments, lecturers, and representatives of the education ministry and media organisations to identify problems and suggest solutions.

Marat Mamadshoev, the editor of the Asia Plus newspaper, says the education system is in crisis. He told IWPR that one of the main problems with training is that it is centred on theory, not practice.

The current state curriculum, which was approved by the education ministry five years ago and is used by all six Tajik universities that offer journalism, only three of the courses involve modern technology. With no television or radio stations, or newspapers, the universities have no facilities for students to practice their skills.

“Education must be more focused on practice, so that universities educate fewer linguists than is now the case at present, and more journalists,” said Mamadshoev.

Said, who graduated from Tajikistan State National University this year, said that on his course, some of the lessons came in the form of long, tedious lectures. The only classes he thought were good were mostly given by teachers who had actually worked in the media.

“It would have been good if we’d been taught by more journalists with media experience, who know the fine points of the profession, the way to talk to sources and other nuances. When I started working in the media, it was the recommendations and advice these teachers gave me that helped me,” he said.

He added that for some subjects, there were no textbooks either in Russian or Tajik.

A graduate of the Russian-Tajik Slavic University also said she was not given adequate practical training to prepare her for working with news agencies.

“We were told in purely theoretical terms how to write material – reports, articles and so on – but there was no emphasis on the fact that different types of media have their own specifics and their own requirements. For example, the Avesta and Asia Plus agencies use different writing styles for news reporting,” she said.

Mamadshoev argues that in addition to modern, practical skills, students should receive a thorough grounding in more academic subjects such as law, logic and philosophy, to train young journalists to ask the questions that readers are interested in.

“They should be competent at applying their knowledge. They should be able to combine and supplement the knowledge they receive, make decisions, solve problems, and think critically,” he said.

Experts are also pushing for a selection procedure to be introduced for university enrolment, as they say there are too many students studying journalism for no good reason.

Alisher, who graduated two years ago, said that in his year, there were very few students who really wanted to become journalists, and that some only enrolled to get a diploma.

But those graduates who genuinely do want to work in media often find they lack the necessary skills and struggle to find work, and there are currently few recent journalism graduates working on Tajik newspapers.

Alisher and Said both told IWPR that only a few of their classmates managed to find jobs.

The State National University has around 700 students enrolled in the journalism faculty, and 150 graduate each year. But according to the dean of the faculty, Sangin Gulov, only a small percentage will go on to work as journalists.

Gulov said the low salaries on offer at universities mean they have trouble recruiting professional journalists as lecturers, so journalists are often taught by people with little or no practical experience.

While about 75 per cent of students at the six universities offering journalism courses pay fees ranging from 200 to 600 US dollars per academic year, the institutions still fail to offer their staff the equivalent of the average wage for a practicing journalist.

“We have tried several times to bring in experienced journalists to teach, but they refused to work for the 54 somoni [15 dollars a month] that a lecturer receives,” Gulov said.

Media experts are calling not just for courses to be brought up to date to respond to a changing market and developments in technology, but also for mechanisms to be introduced to improve the qualifications of journalism tutors.

UNIVERSITIES MUST DRIVE CHANGE

Rukhshona Olimova, media coordinator for the Soros Foundation in Tajikistan, argues that if standards of training are to be improved, the universities must drive change.

“The universities themselves must urgently introduce innovative teaching methods of teaching and more practical lessons, as used in western universities,” she said.

Alidod Rasulov, a specialist at the education ministry and deputy head of the department for universities at the Tajikistan education ministry, agrees with this view.

He told IWPR that reforms in training methods are necessary to ensure new journalists have modern skills, but that it is up to universities and journalism faculties to push for these.

“If they lobby for programmes and curricula to improve and modernise media education, we will be all for it - but we haven’t yet received anything,” he said.

At the ministry’s department for universities, IWPR was told that reforms are required not just in media education, but in higher education as a whole.

But Abdusattor Nuraliev, the head of the journalism faculty at the Russian-Tajik Slavonic University, argues that universities are not capable of dealing with this problem on their own.

“There must be an analysis of the situation with journalism education and the modern media market, and universities, the media and journalist organisations must be part of that process. The problems must be identified and a special programme designed to improve education for journalists,” Nuraliev told IWPR.

CALL FOR GREATER COLLABORATION

At present, there is little cooperation between the media and education, with universities unaware of the needs of the media, and the latter in no hurry to work with the education sector.

As part of their courses, journalism students complete work placements, but some are unhappy with the treatment they receive on these. At the same time, managers at some media outlets allege that students attempt to bribe them to pass their practical exercises.

One student - Sabokhat - did her practical training at one local media outlet last year and found the staff unhelpful and even obstructive.

“Not all the media outlets took interns readily, or gave students the necessary attention and help. If we ever came up with an initiative or an idea, they immediately put a stop to it,” she said.

Sabokhat said the media must do more to help students, “I think that a lot depends on the media themselves. If they want good employees, then they should cooperate by helping students and giving them guidelines and direction.”

Mamadshoev suggested that universities could select the most promising students from senior courses and put them forward to be trained by newspapers.

But media outlets have been reluctant to become involved with training so far, preferring to hire staff with experience.

“If the media really are interested, then they should solve these problems together with universities, so that they train the necessary specialists, but, unfortunately, the media wants staff that are already trained,” says Jovid Mukim, who is one of the few practicing journalists teaching at the State National University.

Mukim said local media should become patrons of journalism faculties and departments, and establish links among universities, media outlets, media groups and international organisations.

INTERNATIONAL HELP NEEDED

Olimova said that while the media have the skills to train students, there is no financial incentive for them to do so. “Many of our professional journalists have the potential to work as trainers, but for financial reasons they don’t want to share their knowledge for free, ” she said.

She suggested that cash-strapped teaching institutions could modernise their curriculum by enlisting the help of international organisations.

“Universities should ensure that their teaching body has maximum participation in practical courses conducted by international organisations,” she said.

To meet the demand for new skills, she says, the Soros Foundation launched a summer school in 2006 for journalism lecturers at Tajik universities. Taught by lecturers from the Russian city of St Petersburg, the course is designed to introduce modern teaching methods, and will take place again this summer.

Many students are prevented from attending practical training courses outside the formal curriculum, as some teaching staff still forbid their students from attending them. An unofficial ban on students attending “international events” was imposed in the run-up to the 2006 presidential elections. Tajik officials, who suspected that international organisations were behind a popular revolt in neighbouring Kyrgyzstan in 2005, wanted to avoid a similar uprising in their country.

A lecturer at the State National University told IWPR anonymously that some institutions continue to stop

students participating in practical courses conducted by non-government groups, fearing that this will introduce them to subversive views.

He says this is a short-sighted attitude, and argues that young people who were exposed to the horrors of Tajikistan's 1992-97 civil war, are not interested in this creating an opposition.

"The international community has the resources and the capacity to help students and universities to upgrade media training to international standards. Most of our Soviet-minded government officials, and those of our professors who hold totalitarian views, just narrow the opportunities available to students, who want to study and are not interested in fighting," he said.

Nurali Davlatov, who teaches at the Slavonic University, also believes it is important for students and lecturers to participate in practical courses offered by international media development organisations, as a way of learning modern techniques and fostering cooperation with the outside world.

"I don't think international organisation are going to go beyond their mandate and teach students how to create a opposition here. It's ridiculous to assert that these practical courses will have a negative impact on the students," he said.

Mahmadjon Dodoboev, who teaches journalism at the Khujand State University in the north of Tajikistan, thinks international organisations could supply many of the resources and technology that are currently lacking.

"Such equipment is very expensive, and assistance from international organisations in the shape of grants, technical assistance, textbooks and the exchange of experience among teachers would be invaluable."

Munira, a student at the State National University, said students are keen to participate in practical training sessions run by international organisations, but have been prevented from doing so.

"Since last year, we haven't been allowed to attend, even when we showed official invitations. No reason was given for this," she said.

Munira said she and her classmates were looking forward to the summer, when they will be free to attend training events out of term time.

"These courses have given us much more practise than we ever get at university. Many organisations run training programmes over the summer, and most of us are looking forward to participating as we'll be on holiday."

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