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The Involvement of Educational Stakeholders in the University Curricular Design

Mirela MINICĂ¹, Suzana DEMYEN²

Abstract

The present paper aims to illustrate the importance of educational stakeholders involvement in shaping the university curriculum. In this regard, we tried to highlight both the role that education has as in the development of skills and competences of individuals on long term, but also the view of the business environment representatives concerning specific issues as: the relevance of the concepts studied during the academic years, the possibility of developing analytical and problem-solving abilities, the usefulness of an interdisciplinary approach. The second part of the paper presents a report which summarizes the results of the consultation of business environment representatives, regarding the development of the curriculum for the academic year 2017 – 2018, in the case of the master program entitled Marketing and Business Communication

Keywords:

Education, curriculum, Bologna process, skills, business environment.

1. Introduction

Education is a constantly changing field, with features specific to the geographic area we refer to. Some of the most important features that must be mentioned are the adaptable and the dynamic character, because the "raw material" which is operated with is the human factor [9], being mentioned the necessity to customize the educational process according to the

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intellectual capacity, the opening capacity, the stage of evolution in which a person it is located, namely the disciplines through which the information is to be transmitted.

The complexity of the educational process derives, on the other hand, from the fact that, unlike other fields of activity, the educational process is based on and requires the formation of characters and altogether the transmission of values.

Education gains the role of enhancing the intellectual capital of a nation, contributing to the development of entrepreneurial qualities and skills [2] of the individuals on long term, from primary to tertiary education. Entrepreneurial qualities and skills are acquired through carefully organized training curriculum for entrepreneurship education (Isobel et al, 2003, in [4]), while the criteria of learning, becomes of great importance in establishing mindsets (Linan, Francisco, Batistelli, & Moriano, 2008, in [4]).

At an individual level, education represents an aspect that highly affects not only the level of earning, but also the “employability and the chance of succeeding in life, health, future family structure, intellectual fulfillment and other aspects of a good life” [3].

“The European Standards for Higher Education influence the curriculum design” [4], while the European Qualification Framework is meant to “set the basis to improve mobility and global work markets highlighting the role of University Education that now have to adapt to the new strategies” [4,6].

In the National Strategy for Tertiary Education 2015-2020, correlated with the Europe 2020 Strategy, the strategic partnership with the economic environment and the provision of flexible and high quality study programs are achievable priorities only by investing in human capital [12].

2. Problem Statement

Modern teaching is or it should be based on the development of competences, in a constantly changing world, thus, some of the main elements that prove to be indispensable for establishing a proper educational strategy, are an “outcome-based curricula and competence – based syllabus” [6].

Various studies developed across the European Union, also the National Strategy for Tertiary Education 2015-2020 express the need to invest in a higher education system which is adapted to the labor market needs and also the needs of the current generation of young people.

Numerous programs promote the experiential learning [8], storytelling, values education, enquiry learning, appropriate assessment, future problem solving, learning outside the classroom, community problem solving [5]. In this complex economic environment, human resources become increasingly the pillar on which management is based. In this regard, universities are required to become a vector of the knowledge society, to adapt the characteristics of postmodernism applicable to each generation.

Whether we speak about the Romanian educational system, or we refer to any other country's higher education system, we must mention the necessity for a profound transformation, which can be transposed into a long-term goal. The process of transformation imposes a more careful attention to the quality [7] policies and also procedures, in order for the curricula to meet the requirements of the labor market and the overall economy of the present day [1].

As literature mentions [4], "the Bologna Declaration issued in 1999 can be considered the starting point for a paradigm change in the European Higher Education Area" [10]. At the same time, The European Qualification Framework is considered to be a basis for the paradigm change in Europe, considering that it addresses a very large area of issues regarding qualification. As stated by the European Commission, "it acts as a translation device to make national qualifications more readable across Europe, promoting workers' and learners' mobility between countries and facilitating their lifelong learning" (European Commission, 2013), referring to all the three cycles of the Bologna Process: bachelor level, master level and PhD. According to Eurostat reports, "the Bologna Declaration was signed in 1999 by ministers responsible for higher education from 29 European countries", but the "reforms have affected countries within and beyond Europe and the number of official signatory countries has risen to 47" [11].

Therefore, we can identify a strong need for the Universities to adapt to these new frameworks, with concentration on a competence – based teaching approach, even if, as it easily can be mentioned the set of competences needed in every field of activity is different from a degree program to another, and also from one subject to another.

These competences are not independent one from another, they often may be interrelated and should be defined on several levels of expertise.

As for the learning outcomes, understood whether as a guide to what it is intended to be achieved through the educational process (Barnett & Coate, 2005, in [4]), or as a "particular methodological approach to the expression and description of curriculum", we can refer to them in terms of

“knowledge, skills and attitudes that identify the learning process” [4,6]. Literature designs the following set of characteristics of these outcomes:

- a brief sketch of the main ideas of a course
- an intended result
- clarity
- uniqueness
- concision.

The meaning of curricula is often debated in the academic institutions. So far, we can mention a few ideas stated in literature, as follows:

Table 1. Literature review

Concepts / terms / characteristics	Stated by:
A conceptual continuum, “product-focussed”, “process – focussed”, teacher centred curriculum, “student centred curriculum”	Fraser, Bosenquet, Lahiff, O’Farrell
A “process approach” to curriculum design, orchestration of the learning process and the available resources	Knight, 2001
Curriculum coherence, constructive alignment of teaching and learning activities	Biggs, 2003
A typical course design	Toohy, 1999
“The developmental process of constructing knowledge and experience in such a way that it will increase the ability of the student to grow in spiritual and emotional maturity as well as in academic excellence.”	K.P. Du Preez

The curriculum is also considered to be “a result of decisions regarding following matters” [6]:

- I. Statement of aims.
- II. Selection and arrangement of curricular areas.
- III. Establishment of content for different stages of education.
- IV. Pattern of learning and teaching experiences.

Literature develops the concept of entrepreneurial education, a concept that is mentioned more by universities which promote the “development of social, cultural and economic values”, in direct connection with a positive economic evolution [2].

These ideas can be expressed referring to the ensemble of features useful “to set up an entrepreneurial culture”, mentioned by OECD as being:

- leadership and governance;
- organizational capacity, people and incentives;
- entrepreneurship development in teaching and learning;
- knowledge exchange with the external environment;

The entrepreneurial approach in teaching and learning is destined to develop specific skills, which can be demonstrated as being essential for the future strategy planning. Also, this assumes an evaluation of the importance of stakeholders, based on the following coordinates:

- Educational staff development;
- Deans, vicedeans, heads of departments;
- Creation of teams for research and teaching;
- Guidance offered to students;
- Proper implementation of ICT services;
- Higher level of involvement for the business environment.

3. Case study. Methodology of research

Following the ideas presented in the first part of the paper, we can further present a report which summarizes the results of the consultation of business environment representatives, regarding the development of the curriculum for the academic year 2017 – 2018, in the case of the master program entitled Marketing and Business Communication.

In order to determine the development process of general and specific competencies to be more efficient, respectively in order to correlate the contents of the curricula with the real needs and requirements of the labor market, we developed a questionnaire consisting of 12 questions, out of which 10 included references to the usefulness of the key concepts learned during the university studies, the extent to which the interdisciplinary approach contributes to an objective evaluation of professional problems, the extent to which the subjects studied encourage the development of critical thinking and the extent to which the creative application of research methods, techniques and tools can contribute to the formulation of a consistent business strategy.

The purpose of the study was to determine the attitude of the representatives of the business environment regarding the curriculum studied during an academic year. In order to accomplish this, we listed a few hypotheses, as a starting point for the study carried out further. The hypotheses were:

H1. The key concepts that students acquire through the study of disciplines in the curriculum are useful at work and long-term based.

H2. An interdisciplinary approach contributes to the objective and constructive evaluation of the professional problem by generating: analytical and problem-solving abilities, numerical computing skills or organizational and time management skills.

H3. The disciplines in the curriculum are generating the development of critical and constructive thinking for formulating alternatives through: communication skills, creativity, flexibility and adaptation, knowledge of business mechanisms

H4. The knowledge and use of specific IT applications and databases are useful in practical work

H5. The knowledge regarding the national and European business environment is important for the organization

The questionnaire was applied in April 2017 to 50 companies from the county of Caraş Severin, and after the results were centralized, 34 of them were validated, with complete answers.

The companies that completed the questionnaire belong to different fields of activity, the respondents being both managers and employees in execution positions. The structure of the sample was the following:

4. Findings

The results obtained can be centralized as follows:

- The first question referred to the extent at which the key concepts learned through the study of disciplines in the curriculum are useful at work. The respondents were asked to grade this aspect on a scale from 1 to 5.

The answers given by companies to this question indicate a great degree of usefulness of the key concepts learned during the study period, through the disciplines listed in the curriculum. The majority of the representatives of the enterprises (21) answered the questions by grading with 4 and 5 points, 8 respondents pointing this criterion with the average grade 3. The main subjects identified as being in direct correlation with this question are the following: Marketing management, respectively the Management of SMEs, the economic agents recommending their intensive study, in order to substantiate the main concepts needed to be applied at the workplace. Both are current, as marketing is a discipline present in the activity of all organizations, while the Management of SMEs justifies its usefulness in the everyday economy, dominated by small and medium-sized enterprises.

- The second question sought to determine the extent to which the interdisciplinary approach contributes to the objective and constructive evaluation of the professional problem by generating: analytical and problem-solving abilities, numerical computing skills or organizational and time management skills.

The interdisciplinary approach is considered to be very important for the objective and constructive evaluation of the professional problem. As regards the first criterion, the generation of analytical and problem-solving skills, 28 economic agents out of 34 grant 5 points, implying a high degree of importance. A similar result can be seen in the case of the third criterion, where a large number (25) of economic agents recognize a great importance of generating organizational and time management skills. For these, respondents mentioned the importance of disciplines such as Project Management, Direct Marketing and Promotional Communication, and Operational Research in Management and Marketing, the latter justifying its importance by generating numerical computing skills, which is appreciated as important (15 responses) and very important (10 responses) to a large extent.

- The third question sought to determine the extent to which the disciplines in the curriculum are generating the development of critical and constructive thinking for formulating alternatives through: communication skills, creativity, flexibility and adaptation, knowledge of business mechanisms.

The disciplines in the curriculum generate the development of critical and constructive thinking for the formulation of alternatives through communication skills (28 respondents have emphasized the importance of this aspect with the grades 5 and 4 respectively), for which it is essential to study disciplines on this specific subject, such as Communication in Marketing, Business Communication in Foreign Languages. Creativity, flexibility, adaptability are essential attributes, positively appreciated by 14 economic agents, while 15 express a neutral opinion. However, their development is supported by the study of Business and Entrepreneurship Strategies, but also of the study of Business Risk Management, all of which

being disciplines designed to develop the skills of understanding the business mechanism, criteria that is considered important by a number of 24 respondents.

- The fourth question tries to determine to what extent the creative application of research methods, techniques and tools can contribute to the formulation of the business strategy, from the following perspectives: leadership skills, adaptability, motivation to work in the field of marketing, coordination of working groups and communication in the project team.

Both leadership skills and adaptability, motivation to work in the field of marketing, respectively the capacity to coordinate working groups and communication in the project team are positively scored by business representatives, grading all aspects with 4 and 5 points respectively, recognizing the major contribution of the creative application of research methods, techniques and tools to the formulation of the overall business strategy. In this respect, the key role of disciples as Leadership and Business and Entrepreneurship Strategies is emphasized, the theoretical knowledge being based on a broad scientific research activity for the dissertation thesis.

- Question 5 - "To what extent are knowledge and understanding of marketing methods and techniques useful and have practical applicability?" gives us the following results: the vast majority of the economic operators who answered the questions graded 4 and 5 points respectively, identifying a high degree of usefulness of knowledge and understanding of marketing methods and techniques. This applies to disciplines with applicative character, such as relational marketing or Product and brand management,

Ethics and consumer protection, the theoretical knowledge being grounded through practice.

- The sixth question tried to measure at what extent the knowledge and use of specific IT applications and databases are useful in practical work. The activity of any organization is closely dependent on specific IT applications and databases. This fact is reinforced by the grades 4 and 5, given by a number of 28 respondents, who appreciate to a great extent the usefulness of their knowledge and their use in practice. In support of these ideas comes the recommendation of the economic agents to include specific disciplines in the curricula, namely Web-design and Marketing Databases, these being nominated as essential for the training of a good specialist.

- Question 7 - "To what extent the graduates of the master program can be involved in the marketing and communication strategy enhancement?" indicate various answers, from this point of view, being

given a number 4 points individually by a number of 10 representatives, respectively 5 points by a number of 11 firms, while there are also neutral opinions (6), respectively negative ones (4). This is mainly because the level of involvement of graduates or students in enhancing the marketing strategy is conditioned by a number of factors such as the field of activity, the size of the firm, its type. However, it is positively welcomed to include in the curriculum some disciplines such as Strategic Marketing or Direct Marketing and Promotional Communication.

- Analyzing the level of usefulness of the knowledge regarding communication and sales, we conclude that from this point of view, these aspects are marked as very important for the economic agents, in this regard being considered important a series of disciplines such as Methods and techniques of negotiation and sale, Marketing Communication.

- Question 9 referred to the extent at which the knowledge regarding the national and European business environment is important for

the organization. From this point of view, it can be noticed that there are not very large differences between the views expressed by the economic agents.

They consider the knowledge regarding national and European business environment to be an essential criterion for ensuring success in the business. The scores are above average, with 20 respondents assigning 5 points, indicating the maximum importance of the criterion. In support of this argument comes the recommendation to include in-depth disciplines such as Market Globalization Issues, European Business Environment, Economic and Financial Evaluation of Business, Comparative Marketing.

- The final question analyses the extent to which marketing is important for the organization. In support of the argumentation regarding the importance of digitization, and based on the positive development of online marketing, firms mention this aspect as essential to a rapid development of a business, assigning high scores in this respect, appreciating the level high importance.

Employers suggestions on developing teamwork skills, engaging in projects, organizing and time, stress and conflict management will be carried out starting with the academic year 2017-2018 by including Volunteering as an Optional Discipline in the curriculum and also by intensifying the professional counseling activities carried out by the Center for Guidance and Counseling, in collaboration with the teaching staff.

5. Conclusions

When analyzing the current situation of the Romanian tertiary education, we can conclude the following aspects:

- Statistical data indicate a decrease of the schooling population, for demographic reasons, but also immigration and economic reasons;
- Romania faces a decrease in the number of high school graduates, phenomenon that takes place under various forms: a significant number of students drop out from school, while it can also be observed a decrease of the graduation rate on the Baccalaureate exam, although the number of pupils in dual education and TVET schools is increasing;
- Higher education institutions face a very low level of funding;
- The lack of autonomy is very important. Thus, at the bachelor cycle, the evaluation of the curriculum done by ARACIS is based on a strict list of disciplines, of which some are inconsistent with the requirements of the labor market;
- The difficult, highly bureaucratic process of accreditation and periodic evaluation, leads to a lack of flexibility and adaptation to the requirements of the real economy;
- There can be identified a labor deficit on the Romanian market;
- There is an increasing level of involvement of employers' representatives in the educational process (practical activities, consultations concerning the curriculum elaboration, study visits, educational projects, job fairs, etc.).

Following the results of the study conducted, we can state that the hypotheses listed at the beginning of the second part of the present paper are highly confirmed through the responses of the subjects. Thus, we conclude that:

H1 is confirmed, as the key concepts studied during the master studied are considered useful at work and long-term based.

H2 is confirmed, as the respondents appreciate the interdisciplinary approach, which is mentioned as generating: analytical and problem-solving

abilities, numerical computing skills or organizational and time management skills.

H3 is confirmed, because a large percent of the respondents consider that the disciplines in the curriculum are generating the development of critical and constructive thinking.

H4 confirms, as the importance of databases is recognized by most of the respondents.

H5. The knowledge regarding the national and European business environment is important for the organization, aspect positively appreciated by a large number of subjects.

In conclusion, we can propose the following recommendations:

- The continuous adaptation of the curriculum and content to the requirements formulated by stakeholders;
- A reducing level of bureaucracy and the correlation of the accreditation requirements with the financial resources allocated to universities;
- An additional funding for investments in order to implement the upgrading of ICT infrastructure;
- An increase in the exchange of good practices between universities within the country, promoting the transition from competition to cooperation;
- Adoption at each faculty level of a teaching-learning-evaluation strategy, continuously improving, involving all teachers and administrative staff;
- A continuous training of the teaching staff, both on the professional and the didactic component.

According to the National Strategy for Tertiary Education 2015 – 2020 [12], there are a series of aspects that need to be accomplished in order to generate flexible and high quality study programs, but also to establish strategic partnerships with the economic environment. Some of these can be mentioned as follows: extending the capacity to redesign programs, involving employers in designing and delivering programs, supporting staff exchanges and including practical experience in courses, developing a permanent evaluation of transversal and entrepreneurial skills programs, good training of graduates by acquiring transversal skills and a comprehensive understanding of the disciplines covered, maintaining the quality of study programs at the level of relevant stakeholders' expectations, through ongoing cooperation with them, strengthening their curriculum modernization capacities to respond more effectively to the needs of the labor market and students.

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