Sorana Săveanu & Florica Ștefănescu
University of Oradea

Academics perception about university curricula in Bologna system
Main theme of Group B3

Preparing students to enter the labor market

Group members:

Leaders:
Dr. Florica Ștefănescu
Dr. Csoba Judit

Researchers:
Sorana Săveanu
Szűcs Enikő

Objectives:

✓ Assessing the actual demand for highly educated labor force and a prognosis of demand for human resource
✓ Analysis of correlation of university curriculum with the demands of the labor market in the region
✓ Analysis of students’ expectations regarding their integration in the labor market
Previous results


The paper is an enquiry regarding *the effects* on the socio-economic level of the implementation of the Bologna process within the Romanian higher education system and an *investigation of the employers’ perception* and that of the community regarding the benefits that Romanian universities’ reform has brought for those who offer educational services especially for the labor market.

Main findings

Regarding the employers’ views about the labor market, one can notice that they are inconsistent *(balance between the demand and the request for labor force)*

The level of studies is an important factor of employability.

The relationship between them and the educational services providers has not improved once the first Bologna system graduates have entered the labor market.

Even more, the old system receives *positive appreciations*.

The new system is considered responsible especially for the *gaps in the youth’s practical training* and for the *lack of balance* between theoretical and practical training.

The previous professional experience represents one of the criteria for the job candidates selection. Also, there are other skills and abilities appreciated at the work place (*cross-competences* gathered along the years of study)
The paper reveals some of the opinions and attitudes of teachers from higher education regarding the Bologna system in terms of learning content and the university curricula.

Theoretical approach

Social and economic changes currently exerts pressure on the higher education system as a whole, pressures that claim a greater openness of universities toward the community and its needs and a better relationship between knowledge acquisition and the application of knowledge, between theory and practice, between education and labor market entries.

One of the most important and wide changes in European higher education was the transition to the Bologna system, together with the entire suite of measures, regulations and standards that accompanied him.

The Bologna system comprehensive reform to ensure simplification, modulation, certainty, flexibility and transparency in European higher education activities (The Bologna Declaration on the European space for higher education: an explanation, 2000).

‘higher education neighborhood’ (Gibbons et al., 1994, p.6) = forms of training and study programs of different levels: colleges, bachelor, master and doctoral studies, formal, non-formal and informal learning and evaluation.
Bologna system → 2 main objectives:

- to create an *European area of education* (as a joint market of educational services) with uniform rules and standards that allow comparison and equivalence of diplomas, therefore facilitating the free movement of labor force and mobility of persons in the European area (Berlin Communiqué, 2003);

- to increase competitiveness of European universities in a globalized world, that will lead eventually to a positive balance of brain drain process (keep young valuable people in Europe and draw other such youngsters from other geographic areas).

= increase of the European human resource performance

The Bologna process cannot be conceived as a uniform one because it is shaped and reinterpreted according to the specific national and institutional contexts in which it is applied (Szolár, 2011).
Determinants of learning content. Toward a curricular isomorphism?

neoinstitutionalism theory - brings back to the forefront the role of institutions in society and highlights the proliferation of successful models through isomorphic processes (DiMagio & Powell, 1983)

Competitive isomorphism

+ Institutional isomorphism – competition “not just for resources and customers, but for political power and institutional legitimacy, [and] for social as well as economic fitness” (DiMaggio şi Powell, 1983, p. 150)

+ Curricular isomorphism: coercive, mimetic, normative.

**coercive isomorphism of the learning contents** = the change occurs under the pressure of external forces such as: national and European educational policies, national and European institutions from higher education field (ARACIS, EUA – European Universities Association), national legislation (CNC –National Qualifications Framework) and European legislation (EQF - European Qualifications Framework), national, European and global labor market, social and cultural expectations.
The first constraint regarding the learning content comes from the university human resource, namely its specialization.

Constraints on learning contents come also from the national organisms which ensure quality in higher education and which impose certain quantitative and qualitative standards: number of hours/week, the relationship between compulsory and optional courses, the number of examinations and other forms of assessment, the share of fundamental, specialized and complementary courses and even fundamental subjects in each field of study (ARACIS).

*Where are students in this equation?*

“student-centered" education

*Are students prepared and able to be involved at this level, to be involved in designing the curricula?
Design of the academic curricula - distinction between use-value and exchange value (Labaree 1998) of knowledge:

**Students** appreciate the academic curriculum related to employability

**Teachers** think of curriculum as an integrated system of knowledge, skills and competencies, as a result of a complex teaching approach

**Employers** appreciate curriculum that provides fast and easy integration of graduates in labor market and its contribution to the efficiency of activity

**Community** sees the curriculum through the human quality of graduates, particularly their citizenship and possibly their entrepreneurial capabilities.

The trend is toward an *academic capitalism* = competitive market for centrally allocated resources. This encourages departments to redesign their requirements and curriculum in ways that are driven more by short-term market than by educational considerations” (Rhoades & Slaughter, 2004, p. 48)
Under the necessity of achieving compatibility of curricula with European universities curricula, in order to facilitate the recognition of diplomas, we actually witness to a some form of mimetic isomorphism.

academic drift (Morphew and Huisman, 2002) - tendency of small, new and marginal universities to adopt curriculas and practices from prestigious universities, in order to strengthen their identity, to attract more students, but also to respond to labor market demands, a trend often seen as a threat to academic diversity (Morphew, 2009).

Regarding the learning contents, normative isomorphism manifests through the establishment of them within the professional associations and academic consortia, therefore being uniform in the case of some specializations (economics, engineering sciences) or very similar in the case of other specializations.
Methodology

University of Oradea: 15 faculties and 47 departments, 107 undergraduate study programs, 86 master programs, plus 11 doctoral schools; in sum there are 17,622 students and 1157 teachers.

2 focus groups - teachers from the faculties of humanities (FG1) (economic studies, socio-humanistic, legal studies, international relations)
- teachers from the technical and scientific faculties (FG2) (physics, chemistry, biology, geography, environmental studies)

Three themes:
1. The transition to Bologna system from the learning content point of view
2. The distinction between skills and employability of BA graduates and MA graduates
3. The share of practical component vs. theoretical component in the Bologna academic curricula
Characteristics of the transition to Bologna system (Changing the curriculum)

The transition to the new Bologna system and the changes that occurred within the learning content have been shaped by the areas of study. The adaptation to the new system took into account the context in which it occurred.

A particular situation of normative isomorphism is found in the development of the curricula in the case of programs from economic and technology areas. This aspect refers to the collaboration, the *formal cooperation, between faculties found at national level*.

- shared vision regarding the general and fundamental disciplines
- prompt response to the standards set by ARACIS

*National Agency for Quality in Higher Education*

For the development of the new curricula, there was used the consultation of other curricula from similar specializations, either in neighboring university centers (Cluj, Timisoara), or those in country (Bucharest) or even abroad (USA, Great Britan, Italy, Greece, Turkey), expression of mimetic isomorphism. This approach is found both for socio-humanistic specializations and for technical specializations.
Curricular restructuring (see also Teal et al, 2011): expel, transfer and merge. Also there are few disciplines that have not been modified in any way.

The transfer of disciplines to MA programs was performed in a smaller proportion, that is because this solution was not consistent with the Bologna strategy, namely to pass on a general training, a core of general disciplines at the bachelor level, and a specific speciality training, with a focus on applicability, in the case of master level programs.

In the study, there was identified also o reverse perspective, that of transmitting more general skills in master programs, that cover a wider area.

There were also developed MA programs without consisting themselves an extension of BA programs.
Guidance of the whole transition process to Bologna system
= ARACIS → induced a centralized, controlled vision on the transition, introducing a coercive isomorphism.

Yet precisely this guided transformation on the basis of externally imposed criteria, induced some confusion in the universities.

The design of the curricula and learning content is done according to socio-economic developments at regional or national levels. Academics recognize that much of university curricula is, or should be, determined according to the specifications required by the labor market, the demand for a specific field of study.

Regarding compatibility of the learning contents with the ones found in European Union, the survey participants noted that one of the problems is reflected in teachers training.

The way in which the transition to Bologna took place:

“... I think the ecological model explains pretty well this thing: you put some small animals in a tree and each of them chooses a branch. There will be formed a trophic chain and there will appear specializations...” (SB-FG1).
Specific competences for BA and MA studies. The employability of graduates

There is still some confusion regarding the contents and competences acquired through the two study cycles: bachelor’s and masters. This is mainly due to the distinction between general and specific competences and the importance these competences have depending on each educational cycle.

Is important to mention regarding the different competences transmitted at BA and at MA levels, the orientation of candidates towards applicative programs which develop practical competences and toward those programs that address scientific research and innovation. This is particularly true in the case of technical fields. The research and innovation competences are accessed especially after some work experience.

→ the lack of an integrative approach for all school levels.
The share of practical component of the higher education curriculum

The study reveals the positive impact of the transition to the Bologna system from the applicative side of the academic curricula’s point of view. Respondents consider that through clear and balanced distribution of theoretical and practical courses, according to the ARACIS standards, there is a significant improvement of professional training of students.

University teachers assign a higher importance to the applicative competences acquired by BA graduates, alongside with transversal competences, which have a fundamental role for entering the labor market.
Conclusions and recommendations

In the elaboration of the Bologna curricula, people kept the old courses which were distributed between BA and MA programs from the same field of study.

Curricula was compressed under the pressure of financial resources and standards regarding the number of hours per week, with direct consequences on restricting the interdisciplinary nature of the study programs, which caused concern among teachers regarding the achieving the aims of higher education.

Teachers complain that the transition to the Bologna system was not accompanied by training human resources in universities, giving rise to confusion, contradictions and failures even for setting the learning content.

There is an obvious concern for the design of the curricula’s practical side by increasing the number of hours, the emphasis on skills, integration of vocational development of skills and competencies in the very act of teaching, which expresses academic responsiveness to the requirements of the economic environment.

Bologna system must ensure harmonization and not standardization.