Redesigning the instructional act in Romanian higher education

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The dynamics and scope of societal changes are reflected in the evolution of the higher education system. Education has to address the ever-changing needs imposed by an active and highly complex market. By means of an empirical analysis, the present study validates the correlation between the expectations of the instructional act (competences), the influential factors and the actual unfolding of the process (teaching/learning) from the perspective of the academic staff. The results provide a diagnosis tool for the current status of the Romanian instructional act, with implications for the future actions of both teachers and students.

Keywords: Economics and business, higher education, instistutional act, teaching/learning methods.

THE intense competition in the higher education sector[1] and its internationalization increase expectations towards higher education institutions[2], which prompts a series of transformations in order to address these needs. A great amount of pressure is exerted by the real-world environment (the employers), who expect graduates to be equipped with a set of competences, abilities, attitudes and mindsets that would support employment shortly after graduation. Graduates have to become useful to their employers and should easily integrate in the technical, economic and social environment.

Thus, the changes need to bring forth market-type solutions[3,4], where the needs and expectations of universities meet those of the employers. In the middle is students' development, as well as the ability of universities to achieve the customer-perceived service quality, which will affect the sustainability of the institution in question[5].

Several authors consider that educational context, curriculum design, learning environment, teaching and assessment practices influence the evolution of a student[6,7]. The main target of training in case of the future graduates is a set of competences that they should acquire. Mulder *et al.*[8] view competences as a series of integrated capabilities consisting of clusters of knowledge, skills and attitudes indispensable for task performance and problem-solving, and for being able to function effectively in a certain profession, organization, job, role and situation. This system of competences leads to a re-design of the university curriculum, where disciplines are converted into professional and transversal competences.

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The present study explores through the point of view of Romanian higher education academic staff. The positioning of a discipline is from three points of view: (1) construction of the curriculum by components; (2) influential factors which render valuable (disciplines converted into competences) the construction of a curricular programme, and (3) delivery of the disciplinary contents through traditional or modern methods. Garcia and Roblin[9] assert that each discipline should be regarded within an interdisciplinary framework, starting from its description in broad lines and continuing with a phase of continuous development, in close relationship with the external setting, the actors involved, the research in related fields and the practical experience.

The motivation for this study is the fact that the bridge between student and teacher, and between quality/ quantity of information conveyed and development of personal efficacy, flexibility and life-long learning of the students is the teaching/learning process[10]. This lays the foundations for the development of the competence system, which is directly responsible for personal growth of the students and indirectly for the evolution of society.

The study sets out to explore empirically, by means of a case study represented by the Romanian context and a field of study – economics and business, the manner in which university teachers involved in the economics/ business area (property economic appraisal and valuation) see the configuration of the teaching/learning system. The research questions examine the extent to which the implementation of competence-based curriculum facilitates the instructional act (RQ1), the main factors influencing the value of an educational programme from curricular viewpoint (RQ2), and the use of traditional versus modern methods in the teaching/learning process (RQ3). The analysis proposed is based on the findings of a European Social Fund project that focuses on the

implementation of a system of competences coherent with the European system at Master's degree level in the economics and business domain, and in particular in the field of property economic appraisal and valuation in Romania.

The remainder of the article is organized as follows: the first part proposes a general overview of the subject matter of this study, stating the research objectives, motivation and purpose. The second section explains the research framework by making references to the relevant literature and presents the research questions. The third section describes the empirical approach construct in the form of specific items, sample and statistical tools. The next section reveals the statistical analysis results and the final section provides responses to the research questions and presents the conclusions.

Describing the coordinates of a market-based education system

Competences approach

The main challenge for higher education is the conflict between the educational needs and its objectives. According to the Europian Union (EU) principles, the solution lies in defining the professional standards in developing the curriculum and in rethinking the professional performance assessment systems.

Gilis *et al.*[11] show that there is no commonly accepted definition of competences, as there is a relatively high number of meanings to the competence concept, which relate to different theoretical, methodological and practical applications[12]. Competences are defined as a collection of skills or abilities that are attributed to individuals apart from the specific contexts in which they operate[13]. Winterton[14] describes competences, starting from a British competence-based approach, as the ability to apply knowledge, understanding and skills in performing the standards required in employment. Mulder *et al.*[8] view competences closely correlated to the educational goals, designed in accordance with the employer's expectations from a future graduate.

Winterton[14] points out the view of Mansfield[15] that enlarges competence reference to individuals who follow the rules without questioning, meaning that competence implies compliance, and skills that aid the development of an individual such as flexibility, adaptability and responsibility. Winterton[14] concludes that this approach was adopted by the European Qualification Framework (EQF). Competence is defined in this framework as the proven capacity to use knowledge, abilities and personal, social and/or methodological skills in work-related or study-related situations, and for professional and personal development[16]. EQF developed eight key competences that focus on critical thinking, creativity, initiative, problem-solving, risk assessment, decision-making, innovation and constructive management of feelings.

As a signatory party of the Bologna Treaty, Romania committed to founding the educational programmes on competences and academic results[17]. In the Romanian academic background formed by 56 accredited state universities and 50 private universities, the relationship between learning outcomes and professional competences poses a great challenge. For the purposes of this study, we will focus on curriculum development, which should start from a student-centred education system and the concept of competence.

Factors which influence the value of a programme from curricular perspective

Carter and Cook[18] argued that current career theories lack an integration of both personality characteristics and external factors, including economic and social circumstances, cultural institutions, all of which play a significant role in the lives and career choices of groups. In light of the above, together with the strategic factors that define the evolution of the educational process starting from the society needs towards the individual, the material factors are instrumental in sustaining the educational programme.

Universities are currently facing an increasingly competitive environment, with firm pressure to commit to the real needs of the society and the business world. The interests of the agents involved (universities, teachers, students) should address the need for a changeover in the education services considering the emergence of new fields and professions. Thus, the agents of the educational process are the first identified taskforce[19], which can decisively influence the worldwide educational landscape; as such, they are the first factor contemplated in this study (a).

According to Santo[20], among the individual factors that may influence the value of an educational programme are the educational objectives themselves, considered the second curricular influential factor (b). One of the paramount modern goals of the educational process is to make education more efficient. The increasing personalization in higher education, together with a shift of focus from teaching to teach help improve the quality of higher education[21]. On the other hand, the quality of education is dependent on the increase in research impact, but the quantity in itself does not guarantee the quality of the instructional act, as shown by Knowles *et al.*[22]. Thus, the actual teaching process is marginalized, some authors dwelling on the existing teaching–research paradox. Although the actual teaching and coursework preparation are extremely time-consuming, they are given less importance in the valuation of the educational programme performance. The time allocated to research is a real issue

for teachers involved in the educational process. On the other hand, the instructional and educational contents delivered, the third influential factor contemplated in this study (c), increase in quality based on the results of research work undertaken. They need to address the ongoing knowledge revolution and the untiring demand of specialized education[21].

The latest information technologies change the very core of the educational process, through the wide range of learning possibilities and platforms provided. Since the education market is global, almost free of any borderlines, the training strategies employed should be adapted to the phenomenon of education globalization and internationalization, which is a crucial step for the current university structures to survive and thrive. Consequently, the teaching methods and programmes should undergo fundamental changes and improvements in order to align as soon as possible to this trend occurring in most education markets[21]. The instructional strategies used represent the fourth curricular influencing factor (d).

Extensive studies conducted by Fogg[23] have shown that a culture for performance and a merit-based environment can enhance quality, even more than the award of financial rewards. Against the decrease of public resources earmarked for education, Barker and Smith Jr[24] considered that the material facilities, the fifth factor contemplated herein (e), available for the educational programme have an overwhelming impact on its quality and credibility.

Finally, the last curricular influential factor explored herein, the evaluation strategies (f), entail systematic assessment of the worth or merits associated with the educational process[25]. Measurement of the educational outcomes is interpreted by the external environment as a method to quantify the added value brought by universities. As such, it is imperative for this assessment to be highly reliable, as it is the tool which shows universities how to improve the instructional activity, students how to select the best establishment for their training, state entities how to spend their resources in an efficient manner, and employers how to identify whether their requirements are reflected in the training of the graduates offered by universities to the labour market.

Discipline approach in terms of teaching/learning methods

General aspects: For a long time, teaching in the field of economics and business in Romanian universities was based on traditional methods – lectures and problem-solving by the professor. According to this instructional strategy, teaching is a mere transfer of knowledge from the teacher's materials to the students' notes[26].

The traditional learning methods, identified as expository or frontal, are defined by a passive approach, which involves memorization and listening to the information delivered during educational activities. The features of the traditional learning methods are listed below in detail[27]: they lay emphasis on memorization of the content, targeting, mainly the informative side of education; they are centred on the teaching activity, while the student is perceived as an object of the training – therefore the communication is unidirectional; they are predominantly communicative; as a rule, they are oriented towards the final product, as evaluation is in fact a reproduction of knowledge; they are formal in nature and stimulate competition; they stimulate extrinsic motivation for learning; the teacher–student relationship is autocratic, and discipline is more often than not imposed.

The traditional methods are not consistent with the new principles of effective involvement of the student. For the most part, they take the shape of didactic exposition, didactic conversation, demonstration, textbook work, drill and practice[27]. Exposition is a method that has been widely used in the educational process for a long time, which led to its classification as a worldwide traditional teaching method. It can also be used in a 'pure' form, but it usually blends with or is supported by other methods, depending on the specific subject matter (e.g. conversation, demonstration). The method which involves textbook work unfolds in a specific way, starting from the complete reading of the text, continuing with the analysis of text parts or topics, and ending with the attempt to summarize the whole and corresponding applications. Separately or as a consequence of the previous methods, drill and practice entail an action plan with the aim to internalize through repetitive practice a certain model of action or to improve a performance.

The shift to the modern teaching methods was triggered by the evolution of the economy and business environment over the past decades, which led to material changes in the graduate's role in society, to the increasingly widespread use of information technologies and the development of more sophisticated practices in economics[28]. These circumstances called for active learning methods, which fall within the category of student- and learner-focused instructional strategies. They entail an active participation of the student in order to understand and grasp the topic taught[29]; they lay emphasis on the development of students' competences by improving the communication and interpersonal networking skills and critical and analytical thinking[30,31], while the teacher is a learning partner, mediator and facilitator[32].

According to an initial classification, the following are active learning methods as cited in the literature[33]: methods based on strategies aimed to encourage students to make notes during the lectures (i.e. notes, summaries, memos); methods based on information technology – 'computerized teaching' (for example, video, multimedia, commercial software packages, PowerPoint presentations); case study solving and inquiry-based methods;

simulation methods (i.e. role-play, simulation-based learning) and collaborative learning methods.

Research questions: Prior discussions have led to a brief examination of the impending need to increase the quality of higher education and of the fundamental research items (competences, influential factors, issues, modern teaching/learning methods). The three research questions developed in this study are:

RQ1: There is a positive relationship between the competence-based curriculum and the discipline-specific instructional act.
RQ2: The strategic influential factors prevail over the material ones in terms of direct impact on the curricular programmes.
RQ3: Modern teaching/learning methods are preferred to the traditional ones.

The empirical approach construct

Survey description: Built on problem statements, specific hypotheses and body of knowledge[34] the approach to the research proposed is positivist, the empirical evidence surveying the opinion of academic members regarding the educational process.

The survey identifies the manner in which the economics Master's programmes in Romanian universities could approach a modern vision on teaching and learning in terms of methods, setting and target objectives (competences). The results achieved provide a starting point in the evaluation of the Romanian educational process, an impulse in accepting and implementing a new mentality in the educational approaches, both on the teachers' and the students' side.

The survey is based on a self-constructed questionnaire, which was reviewed by 12 academics and one statistician. Within the survey structure, the first part of the questionnaire provides general information regarding the eligibility to participate in it (socio-cultural variables). These are: job, position held, age, experience in education and gender. The second part of the questionnaire examines implementation effects of the competence-based curriculum on the instructional act, respectively the influential factors acting on the curricular programmes. The third part of the questionnaire inquiries about the teaching/learning methods, in order to identify the most frequently used ones during the period surveyed. Table 1

Table 1. Research questions/hypotheses and their items

Item symbol	Survey question no.	Item description
RQ1	Q1	Implementation of competence-based curriculum facilitates the instructional act
RQ2	Q2	Factors influencing the value of a programme from curricular perspective
a		Agents of the action
b		Educational goals pursued
c		Instructional–educational contents delivered
d		Instructional strategies employed
e		Space, time and materials
f		Evaluation strategies used
RQ3	Q3	Use of traditional versus modern methods in the teaching/learning process
T		Traditional methods
T1		Expository methods (exposition)
T2		Demonstration
T3		Textbook documentation
T4		Drills
M		Modern methods
M1		Systematic and independent observation
M2		Experiment
M3		Debating
M4		Modelling
M4		Inquiry
M5		Internship
M6		Project
M7		Case study
M8		Simulation
M9		Programmmed learning
M10		Brainstorming
M11		SINELG (interactive note-taking system for streamlining thinking and reading)
M12		Class discussion
M13		Jigsaw

Table 2. Sample characteristics – socio-cultural variables (respondents)

Socio-cultural variable		UBB $N = 15$	UVT $N = 15$	UAIC $N = 15$	UAV $N = 19$	Total $N = 64$	Percentage
Academic rank	Lecturer	6	3	5	2	16	25.00
	Reader	5	7	2	6	20	31.25
	Professor	4	5	8	11	28	43.75
Age (years)	<25		0	0	0	0	0.00
	25–35	3	1	2	0	6	9
	35–45	6	10	5	9	30	46.88
	45–55	5	2	2	3	12	18.75
	>55	1	2	6	7	16	25.00
Experience in education (years)	<5	1	0	0	1	1.56	
	5–10	4	0	2	0	6	9.38
	10–15	3	5	3	7	18	28.13
	15–20	4	5	2	6	17	26.56
	>20	4	4	8	6	22	34.38
Gender	Male	9	12	7	12	40	62.50
	Female	6	3	8	7	24	37.50

lists the survey questions according to correlations with the research questions addressed.

Scaled-response questions were adopted in the second and third parts of the questionnaire, since scaling allows the measurement of the intensity of respondents' answers[35]. The items of the questionnaire in this study were borrowed from different sources of the existing literature. The same approach was used for items of the independent variables 'influential factors' and 'teaching methods taxonomy'. A five-point Likert scale anchored by 'very low' (1) to 'very high' (5) was used to measure the perception towards dependent/independent variables[36,37].

Sample and survey instrument: The target population covered all the academic members involved in the teaching of economics and business Master's students from four leading Romanian universities. The list of Romanian universities by the European Universities Association ranks Babes Bolyai University (UBB) and Al. I. Cuza University (UAIC) in the first class (advanced research and education), the West University of Timisoara (UVT) in the second class (scientific education and research), and Aurel Vlaicu University (UAV) in the third class (education-oriented). They are representative of the economics and business area in Romania, since it owns 70% of the Master's degree in the field of property economic appraisal and valuation.

The questionnaire was completed by 64 faculty members from the sampled universities. Analysis of socio-cultural features of the surveyed population reveals predominantly professors and readers, the explanation for which can be found in the very nature of the Master's degree programmes, which must comply with the regulations in force regarding the academic rank of the instructors who can teach at this level. The average age of the academics was 35–40 years, and experience in education greater than 20 years. Majority of the respondents were male. Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics.

The information gathering process was conducted in June–July 2013, by means of questionnaires distributed to the academic members, with a completion time of 15 min. In an initial phase, responses to the survey were processed in a traditional manner (the results are presented in the next section). Thereafter, they were analysed using statistical tools adapted to the types of variables and the relation between them. The data were processed in SPSS 20.

Results

As regards the importance of competence-based curriculum implementation in streamlining the instructional act, analysis of the responses obtained ($N = 64$) reveals the high intensity attached to this item. As such, 43.63% of the respondents consider the competence-based curriculum highly important for the instructional act. These respondents perceive the curriculum as an assembly of influences with educational value which facilitate the instructional act of the academic staff who responded to the questionnaire. This opinion is supported by 40.87% of respondents who render high importance to this item. Consequently, we can state that RQ1 is validated.

The influential factors on the educational programmes from curricular perspective ($N = 64$) were assessed as having very high and high intensity, as follows: 56.24% consider the educational goals pursued as important, followed by the instructional–educational contents delivered (45.31%), the evaluation strategies used (46.87%) and finally by the teaching strategies (46.7%); 53.3% consider the location, time and materials of medium intensity, followed by the agents of the action (32.82%). These

results point out the importance attached to the influence of factors of strategic nature for improvement of the educational programmes, versus the influential capacity of the material factors. Once again focus is placed on the strategic options in the educational policies for increase in the quality of education (Table 3). Thus hypothesis RQ2 is validated.

Detailing the teaching/learning methods, results of the Survey on faculty members ($N = 64$) reveal a classification of the methods according to the intensity of occurrence indicated. The most important instructional methods are projects (36.17%), debate (34.39%) and drills (34.37%), while the least important for the respondents are jigsaw (53.3%) and class discussions (40%). The methods identified reflect the interest manifested by teachers in reinforcing knowledge, building the skills and abilities of students by conveying imparting a large volume of knowledge in a short time, challenging at the same time their imagination and reasoning, and stimulating their motivation and involvement. Nevertheless, we can conclude that majority of the teachers who offered their perception also referred, besides the traditional methods, to some innovative methods that were not explicitly listed, such as: the pyramid method, the cause–effect diagram, the quintet, the cube and the Ishikawa diagram.

Table 3. Mean and standard deviation of the responses of academic staff on influential factors

Item	$\bar{x}_{com}$	SD_{com}	$\bar{x}_{trad}$	SD_{trad}
a	4.27	0.87	4.33	1.25
b	4.89	0.95	4.45	1.44
c	4.25	0.85	4.58	1.36
d	4.87	0.87	4.55	1.77
e	4.25	0.56	4.11	1.24
f	4.59	0.96	4.27	1.56

Table 4. Post-test mean scores and standard deviation (SD) of competences and traditional curriculum groups

Groups	x	SD
Competences	63.25	0.85
Traditional	44.58	1.56

Table 5. *T*-test results

	Teaching/learning process	
Statistics	Modern	Traditional
Means	80.25	82.14
Observations	86	75
Hypothesized mean difference	0	
$P(T \leq t)$ two-tail	0.60	

The results of correlation between the curriculum construction and influential factors was combined with the factors' intensity degree, approaches made from the higher education academic staff point of view. The method used is based on determining the post-test mean scores, depending on answers provided in the questionnaire by the teachers. They were divided according to the responses into two categories (competences and traditional) depending on whether or not they support systemically the important skills in facilitating teaching approach.

Measure of mean (Table 4) shows a difference (63.25 – 44.58 = 18.67) between the mean scores of the two groups. Result curricula competency system is important to be implemented, being appreciated with a mean difference of 18.67.

According to the results of the questionnaire on higher education, we can conclude that traditional and modern teaching/learning methods are used in a somewhat balanced manner, with a slight preference for the former. This finding is supported by the statements made with regard to the instructional methods prevailingly in the educational process, according to which traditional methods are used to a high and very high extent (53.3%), followed by modern methods (46.7%). Hypothesis RQ3 is invalidated.

To validate this result, we use experimental methodology for evaluating the achievements of students in the teaching/learning process. This experiment was designed for a comparison of traditional versus modern methods of the teaching/learning process with two groups of students. Lessons were conducted in each faculty from our database using the same approach. After completion of the course, both groups wrote tests (12-item questionnaire). A *T*-test comparison analysis was performed in order to examine the differences between the two groups of students (Table 5).

The effect of mean scores of all experiment was not significant at 0.05 (P-value = 0.60). There were no differences on students achievements in these treatments. This overlaps with the answers given by teachers who opted for traditional methods. One explanation could be inertia in the educational process, which starts to be unlocked, modern methods being more and more used.

Discussion and conclusion

Considering the universally accepted truth that a graduating student must be competent to act both independently and in cooperation with others to solve unforeseen problems in challenging situations[38], the approach to higher education is experiencing fundamental changes. This equation implies the academic staff, students and disciplines as a bridge between these two categories of the educational process.

The competence-based disciplines approach should develop the students' skills, as an important part of developing study practices[39]. By understanding the subject matter in relation to the future career path, a student can be motivated much more easily to engage in the educational process[40]. This study proves that there is a high degree of acceptance among the Romanian higher education academic staff for a competence-based curriculum. Moreover, the Romanian higher education system follows this trend by developing an EQF, to facilitate and promote transparency, transfer and recognition of qualifications and competences[17]. Thus, the disciplinary content was converted into competences at the level of the entire Romanian higher education structure, and hence we are confident that all the respondents have correctly understood the concept of competence.

The largest part of the study is related to teaching. By means of a double approach (influential factors and the actual teaching technique), this study has shown that education is a complex process. Universities should invest time and effort in selecting the best strategy while designing educational programmes, whose results are expected to overlap as closely as possible with the expectation of the employers. The study supports this approach, based on acceptance degree of the strategic category factors at the expense of material ones. However, the ability of students to access the facilities offered by tertiary institutions will affect the overall view on the educational process[41]. Implications are manifold, starting from the possibilities to employ modern teaching techniques (e.g. PowerPoint, video conferences, etc.), to the students' access to individual documentation (libraries, databases, etc.).

In terms of the teaching/learning process, a wind of change can be felt, but at a slow pace, since traditional methods are currently being used to a large extent. A possible explanation could be the respondents' age limit (under 35 years, $N = 6$; over 35 years, $N = 58$). The Bologna Treaty (1999) and the accession to the European Higher Education Area (2010) in recent years have imposed essential changes in the higher education setting. Consequently, a change in the teaching mindset requires both time and familiarization with the new trends. This correlates with the results of the present study, according to which teachers under 35 years use modern teaching methods on an almost exclusive basis. In this context, the experimental methodology for assessing the students' achievements of teaching/learning process fails to confirm the use of traditional methods of teaching that are significantly threatened by modern techniques, without considerable effect on the learning process. It follows that students are familiar with both the teaching methods, evidence that is present either in Romanian universities, although currently the traditional method dominates.

The higher education system is highly dynamic. All the elements presented in this study concur to its quality. As a limitation of the study we can refer to the low number of universities surveyed. This is limited by the fact that the study followed the implementation of the European Social Funds Project in four major Romanian universities.

As a follow-up, the study will be extended on a larger sample of universities and respectively academic staff. The relevance of the responses will increase, as the study will integrate individuals who teach in smaller universities from various development areas of the country. Thus, the correlation between the society needs and educational needs will be better outlined.

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