

Validity of Continuous Education Strategies – A Higher Education Management Perspective Approach

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Abstract: Since the beginning of Bologna Process, higher education contribution to continuous education and making it the reason of social-economic growth has been emphasized for many times. Measures taken in Romania in this respect, consisted of adoption of a set of laws with the purpose of supporting those who decide on developing any educational programs after ordinary education is completed. Nevertheless, European statistics evince the fact that our country takes last but one place in Europe, out passing Bulgaria, as regards the indicator of *life long learning*.

This paper presents the results of a study whose purpose was to evince the learning mentality that higher education graduates achieve along several years of education. This analysis has been started with a view that the fundament of a valid strategy in continuous learning has to be the awareness of continuous training that has to be supported by legislative measures as well.

At the same time, we proposed measures to correct the ascertained deficiencies, which are such as: poor cooperation between “school” and economic agents, representatives of employers and employees that have to effectively participate into the establishment of professional training content and competencies to be acquired; lack of strong correlation between professional qualifications provided by educational system and the list of professions; miss adaptation of curriculum and study programs to adult professional training needs; lack of social role models promotions to inspire young people desire fro continuous training; poor organization of information and career counseling activities etc.

Consequently, by this plan, we think that this review can be the necessary instrument for all educational managers in higher education institutions.

Even though having its own uncertainties, knowledge society constitutes a new and big promise of progress and wellbeing, of preventing underdevelopment, of reducing social economic differences that can still be found in the world. The realism of this challenge is emphasized if taken into consideration that knowledge society is founded on scientific knowledge – a resource that has unlimited “fuel” in human intellect. Nevertheless, the

knowledge society requires ever bigger training efforts, higher and higher competencies, forcing education systems to raise the level of norms or training standards.

The changes to be in education shall target the role and functions of education, its orientation, its scope, values and school values. Even though so far no country has an educational system that a knowledge society needs, certain specifications have been stated for education and schools according to recent social needs. Among these it is the one considering that school has to provide *motivation for learning and practice for life-long learning*.

Taking into consideration that within the new society, learning is an activity that has to continue all through the life and among all aspects of life, it is very important that school finds the best way to motivate its students to learn. OECD report in 2003 – *Learners for Life: Students Approaches to Learning: Results from PISA 2000* – clearly demonstrates that motivation is the main factor that determines achievement of high performance in school. At the same time, school has to develop attitudes and abilities for independent learning, both within and outside of school.

Moreover, school efforts in this direction have to be supported by society in its whole (politicians, mass-media, family etc.), and this support should refer mainly to promoted social models. Special attention is needed for labor market evolution and setting of right stimulants to encourage disadvantaged groups to participate to training opportunities.

In the new society school has to be an open, dynamic system, accessible to persons of all ages, including to those that did not take advantage of formal advanced education in the early stage of their life. Educational system has to provide “random access”. All individuals have to be able to continue their formal training at any stage of their life and qualify for work based on knowledge.

At European level the issue of continuous training from higher education perspective (the one considered as fundamental for knowledge society), has been approached, besides other issues of European higher education, within Bologna Process, to which Romania adhered since its settlement in June 1999. European Commission defines continuous learning as “a deliberate continuous activity of learning with the purpose of knowledge, skills and abilities improvement”. As regards the value of the indicator of *life-long learning*, European statistics evince the fact that Romania takes last but one place in Europe ahead of Bulgaria. Thus, in 2005, the percentage of individuals aged between 25 and 64 involved in any educational programs was of 1.6% against European average of 9.7%.

Authors of this essay have conducted a study (on 377 students and 263 of teachers), in the universities of Constanta and Bucharest to identify mentality of present students towards learning and their main reason to learn and train continuously. Study consisted of quiz tests, plain talks on this subject and analysis of data made public by the universities. Start idea was that a positive attitude towards profound learning is determined at higher education institution level, mainly of aspects such as:

- The ability that organization of the training-educational process in the university has to determine students to study beyond formal frame taught in classes;

- Creation of conditions to enhance personalization of the learning process according to students' abilities and interests;

- Emphasis of support that theoretical concepts can provide to practical activities etc.;

Obtained results are presented synthetically as follows:

A. *Positive attitude towards learning is affected by the manner time is allocated for study*

Allocation of insufficient time for learning for expected results may generate for the student, especially for the one that has to learn, anxiety mood, stress, weakness feelings that may induce study abandon, plain memorizing instead of full understanding of concepts to be apprehended, exam pass may become the only goal of learning. The issue

of correspondence between time, difficulty and volume of concepts to learn is evinced at the European level by ECTS system. Results of conducted study demonstrate that in Romania this system is regarded with indifference and most of the times it is randomly applied.

B. Positive attitude towards learning is affected by unclearly set learning objectives

There are many cases when study courses objectives are unclearly set, not corresponding to managerial principles of objective that can be easily observed from data made public by the universities. This situation generates for those in a position to study lack of motivation, of interest for study subjects, difficulties regarding the organization of individual study that shall affect students ability to critical thinking and choosing among various educational strategies, difficulties in the information of economic agents that are interested in labor force represented by the graduates, of their abilities at graduation level and communication with them as regards the skills they are expected to have. This situation generates obstacles in labor market integration and consequently a state of dissatisfaction, discouragement, lack of interest and respect for higher education studies.

C. Positive attitude towards learning is affected by lack of correspondence between learning set objectives and evaluation topics.

Results of quiz test on students and teachers evinced that in Romanian universities there is a tendency to turn to rapid forms of examination (examination by using quiz tests, written examination) opposed to examination forms that allow the student to express freely, creatively, such as oral examination or practical paper one. At the same time, in absence of diverse methods of evaluation, this activity is not regularly developed but concentrates mainly during evaluation period, which determines students to “leap” study. Results of such practice shall be: students are encouraged to channel their efforts to simply memorize information that most of the times , but help them pass the exams; there shall be no constant study, or connections achieved among taught concepts of various study courses, there shall be no exercise of the ability to think logically; contrary to European principles, evaluation has a passive role in the teaching – learning process, of appreciation of performance level of students and not an active one, that is to determine study.

D. Positive attitude towards learning is affected by students’ lack of implication in the research work

More than half of the questioned students have never been involved in research activities developed within the universities.

Such facts associated with the previous observations about the students’ evaluation that does not imply ability of original approach on subjects they are taught, leads to the conclusion that up to their graduation, Romanian students are rarely in a position to prove in original manner their assimilation of knowledge. The fact that students are not involved in research work may enhance certain strains that they feel while studying such as: lack of interest for what they need to learn as a result of difficult associations of theoretic information they get with practical relevance; impossibility to identify their own needs of learning; failure to develop critical thinking by analyzing different specific situations; lack of accustomed individual study; inability to self evaluation of personal opinions, to logical and coherent argumentation, that may lead to their alienation in different work teams, study teams that they attend; failure to adapt to individual or team work; difficult response at the level of masters or /and doctoral degrees etc.

E. Positive attitude towards learning is affected by students’ lack of trust in the educational system ability to train them for labor market demands

Results of the study point out that students imply themselves in teaching activities with their main motivation being the desire to find a job corresponding to their specialization. Yet, they are convinced that changes in education have not contributed to an increase in the education quality and neither to graduates’ competitiveness on labor

market. Above all, students express their discontent to the quality of training teachers can provide and consider they should have educational programs to develop entrepreneurial ideas. This situation affects the importance that students show to higher education, teachers in general or in particular, also the importance they show to the entire work in the faculty that shall determine decrease of study motivation, of investing into education all through their life.

F. Positive attitude towards learning is affected by lack of correspondence between student skills and chosen specialization

Students' poor choice is a compromise presently made by higher education institutions to win the competition, as long as short term winning is actually financial winning. Moreover, teenagers in Romania are never being tested all along educational itinerary with a purpose to actually identify their real skills and abilities towards some kind of activity. Under these circumstances, there is a risky situation that many of them proceed on some education that is not congruent with their abilities and interests, that shall lead to lack of interest, motivation and mediocre level of completion.

To the above-mentioned that have pointed out the organization manner of the education and training process inside universities, we can also add social aspects such as: absence of promotion of social models based on ethical and moral values, poor material appreciation of intellectual work, absence of programs to identify study abilities and financial support of students from poor environment, lack of support from business sector toward education etc., despite significant increase of number of students that turn higher education from elitist environment into mass phenomenon, there comes the conclusion that real interest is not to study, but to simply obtain a diploma. Such superficial approach of education is presently a plague affecting Romanian society in every dimension and this does not inspire to study or continuous professional training.

In Romania, all measures taken for continuous education were mainly of lawful nature, such as those concerning public institutions employees that attend professional training courses and are entitled to basic wages and supplements also if training courses take place elsewhere than residential area; at the same time universities can provide on a contractual basis, some assistance to education trainers of adults or they can start themselves such programs. Moreover, it is allowed by law, the organization of institutions and open education networks that use modern technologies of communication and information collection. The idea of this essay is that, despite all the above mentioned measures, even though they are useful, they do not change the attitude towards studying, an attitude that could generate an increased value of performance indicators.

Consequently, measures we would like to propose are linked to re-establishment of Romanian higher education system on new values and organization principles that implies congruent effort of educational managers at all three levels: national, higher education institutions and even the teacher as manager of his class. Such measures, referring in this paper to the level of higher education institutions are synthetically presented further on.

I. Establishing necessary time to study – study objectives – evaluation activity

Starting point of this target shall be clear setting of study objectives. They shall take into account the knowledge level students have to attain, so it is specific to each faculty and it should be determined with the purpose of resources identification (material and human) that the faculty has got to sustain the teaching – learning process. Starting from final objectives of specialization, every teacher is to establish the objectives of its own teaching subject. Every teacher shall set the teaching - learning methods that are needed for the objectives and competence levels as well as the time required for direct meeting between student and teacher and for individual study also. Most efficient methods are to

be chosen, according to international statistics. This requires, on one side, confrontation with time allocated by the other colleagues so that, per total it shall not overcome the established time by law that a student may allocate t studying that is 1.500 hours/year; and on the other side, there has to be set a manner in which students accept and comprehend the time allocated by the teachers.

To further ensure the congruence among study objectives, teaching-study methods and allocation of necessary time to study, we need correlation between students' knowledge evaluation and study objectives. Following this principle is mainly teacher's task, or the task of university/faculty management with the role to ensure implementation of general frame. On one side there is formalized expression of correlation between study objectives and evaluation forms and on the other side there is free decision of every teacher to establish evaluation methods.

II. Students enroll into research work

Serious approach of skills that research – learning activity have to pass on to students is an issue that is linked both to the higher education institution management, and to every teacher.

Also important is that each studied subject should have a component that requires from all students to practice research work stages. Teachers' main objectives shall not be liked to student elaboration of valuable scientific paper from the point of view of theoretical and/or practical contributions. By fixing such an objective it means not to accept the condition of "attainable objective". It is not realistic to ask of a student in his first study year, and even of those in final years to bring their contribution to the scientific evolution of the field (this is remarkable if it happens, yet only exceptional students can achieve it). Unrealism of the objective derives from the fact that students are merely in the stage of their studying of what science has produced so far, of their assimilation and use of knowledge from various areas of interest (even if they intermingle, student cannot bring original contributions to all fields).

Regardless of the manner students reach completion of research activity (scientific session, paper, essay or précis) we consider that the objectives of research work developed by students are divided into two main categories:

1. Learning of taught concepts – issue that has already been developed in the section of teaching –learning process;
2. Forming of useful abilities for students in order to continue research activity in more evolved forms (within masters or doctoral programs), in order to have positive attitude towards learning all through their life, to rapidly accommodate and have good results on labor market.

Thus, the proposal we make is that teacher should evaluate students' research work on the basis of approach change from „work originality” to specific skills that can be obtained especially by research work. They should be such as:

- Ability to identify the interesting issues for research, analysis and evaluation of given situation;
- Ability to elaborate a work plan and to follow stages of this plan;
- Ability to evaluate research models provided by specialized works and choose and adapt it to own necessities;
- Ability to seize essential information from a variety of bibliographic sources according to their relevance to the research subject, key-notions and elaboration of useful database.
- Capacity to overcome blockage moments and not give up in case of less valid idea or change of plan or work conditions;
- Ability to approach researchers that can provide useful information, communicate with them in order to develop social relationships;

- Development of the ability to work in team, to assume responsibilities, to communicate with other team members and with the coordinator, to assimilate ideas proposed by the team they belong to;
- Responsibility to take own decisions when coordinator or other team members from various reasons cannot be of help;
- Ability to work in organized environment and meet deadlines;
- Capacity to valorize own work, to present in interesting and attractive shape, to argument and sustain own point of view.

Following these targets against those that pursue originality, at least one research work objective shall be attained that is to make students accustomed to study.

III. Connection of education activities to business environment requests

Graduates integration on labor market according to their specialization implies two aspects: professional development and socio – human development, both as important. Consequently, those involved in higher education management shall have to pay equal attention to both requirement criteria.

There are concerns at national level of meeting requests of labor market and qualifications provided by higher education institutions, concerns that have already started cooperation actions between higher education institutions, economic agents, other organizations, to develop specific partnership, research of labor force market, development of entrepreneurial dimension of Romanian universities as well as analysis of compatibility of specializations curricula within fundamental fields of higher education, all these have the role to determine acceleration of students accession to labor market.

All general measures may be left without any actual effect if their essence remains not understood and it is not implemented in every higher education institution and every teacher's action manner. It is useless to state some objectives that are correspondent to European tendencies, to support necessity of action plans since every study course, seminar and confrontation teacher – student or time spent by teachers for their own professional development, if those measures are not applied.

These targets cannot be met with declarative meetings only between universities and economic agents. A very important measure that higher education institution management needs is *economic agents' commitment to university life*.

This fact should be of much importance within higher education institutions and formal approach has to be avoided. Organizational structure within university would be useful in order to manage partnership between university and economic agents. Management of this structure does not have to be conditioned to academic titles but to results and commitment of practical activity of coordinator, who, under the circumstances of subordination to academic authorities, may be representative of business environment and not teacher. He shall have his own work team taking into consideration the activities he has to develop:

- Elaboration of database with most important possible employers of university graduates;
- Organization of meetings between employers representatives, teachers and students;
- Employers commitment to objective elaboration of practical activities within teaching plans;
- Providing of professional training programs by university that are to be used by employers;
- Elaboration of applicable tests for employers to establish the level of satisfaction concerning students competences, in general or of graduates in particular;

- Procession of obtained answers and their integration within teaching activity to follow in the university

It is very important for these activities to be conducted constantly, strictly organized and with obvious completion. They shall be part of the working quota of those in charge with them and rewarded according to results. We consider the success of such project is conditioned, on one side, by employers approach as partners that naturally follow own interest and on the other side, by the approach as distinct activity in the university, as important and correlative to teaching – learning and research – study activities.

IV. Students career orientation according to their abilities

Practice within well-known world universities supports the idea of necessary student evaluation before his admission of entrance examination, of his skills and potential to attend specific classes of some faculty. The fact that the system of abilities testing is used at entrance exam such as at Oxford or Cambridge for more than 20 years validates its usefulness. These tests measure according to specialization, student ability to make logical deductions, creativity, critic capacity, coherence. Surely that such selection method would mean for many universities in Romania to be left without students. Meanwhile, those universities that have entrance exams should include, to their own benefit and students' within elaborated strategies, the replacement of traditional entrance exams with skill tests. Even if such tests shall or shall not be sooner or later part of universities practice, the existing correlation between professional success and students skills should not be ignored. This solution, applied by some of Romanian universities is organization of information centers of counseling and professional orientation. To avoid useless consumption of material human, financial resources, there should be common financial support of more universities to form such centers.

The present paper within interest field of higher education is focused on solutions to be applied at this level. Yet, we need to remind that successful implementation of above mentioned principles is strongly connected to the manner of organization of the entire national education system. It is about the fact that the issue of skill identification cannot be solved by approaching it at the higher level at education. Skill identification should be a concern starting from the very moment the child is enrolled to the education system (since kindergarten).

With all the above mentioned we think that they can be a useful starting point in elaboration of valid strategies of encouraging the activity of continuous study whose solid base cannot be but a healthy attitude toward study.

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