

Project Management Competencies for Master Students: Curriculum Development in Two Romanian Universities

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Abstract

The Bologna Process has as one of its main pillars the link between academic curricula and labour market requirements. This process has built a space for dialogue and cooperation which reaches far beyond Europe, where the basic values of the European society – freedom of expression and research, free movements of academics and students, students active participation to learning and tolerance – have been put at the forefront of education. Since 1999, Romanian universities have tried to adjust their curricula and academic offers for study programs to the requirements of the labour market, sometimes with some reluctance from the various partners involved in this process. As the field of Project Management has gained more standing on the Romanian labour market, the need for graduates skilled in Project Management increased, thus leading to the need of providing students enrolled in master programs in Economics, but with different specializations, courses and topics in Project Management. The paper outlines the experience of adapting the curriculum of master programs in Economics in two renowned Romanian universities – Bucharest University of Economic Studies and Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu - to Project management needs, within a project implemented with the support of the European Social Fund for Human Resources Development (POSDRU). The paper presents the most important curriculum changes implemented for the master programs under analysis and explains the importance of these changes.

Keywords: Higher education, academic curricula, labor market, project management

Introduction

The Bologna Declaration, signed in 1999 by ministers responsible for higher education from 29 European countries, started a cooperation process in the area of higher education that induced reforms in countries within and beyond Europe. Those reforms were marked by changes in legislation and

reconsidering of the basic principles of the educational process for a knowledge-based society, aiming at ensuring “more comparable, compatible and coherent systems of higher education in Europe”, according to the Bologna Process – European Higher Education Area website, www.ehea.info. The newest Bologna Process Implementation Report, issued in 2015, informs that the current number of official signatory countries is 47, all of them being part of the European Cultural Convention and dedicated to the same goals of the European area of higher education. At the European Higher Education Conference (EHEA) Ministerial Conference in Yerevan (May 2015), the participant ministers acknowledged the progress that has been made in enabling students and graduates to move within the EHEA with recognition of their qualifications and periods of study, the study programs that provide graduates with the knowledge, skills and competences either to continue their studies or to enter the European labor market, the fact that institutions are becoming increasingly active in an international context and that academics cooperate in joint teaching and research programs. At the same time, they recognized that the implementation of the structural reforms is uneven and the tools are sometimes used incorrectly or in bureaucratic and superficial ways. In this framework, the signatory countries agreed to pursue a number of key goals, aimed at consolidating EHEA: (1) Enhancing the quality and relevance of learning and teaching, seen as the main mission of the EHEA; (2) Fostering the employability of graduates throughout their working lives in rapidly changing labor markets; (3) Making the educational systems more inclusive, as populations become more and more diversified, also due to immigration and demographic changes; (4) Implementing agreed structural reforms as a prerequisite for the consolidation of the EHEA and, in the long run, for its success.

Starting with 2000 Romania has entered a period of a sustained economic growth positioning itself above the average EU GDP per capita growth rate, but, as Badea and Serban-Oprescu (2011) point out, the period of economic growth that lasted between 2001 and 2007 was merely reflected in the public expenditure on education. Many specialists believed that once the Bologna process will start to be implemented in Romania, one of its direct effects will reside in higher government expenditures in the area of higher education. The Bologna Process has been implemented since 2005, however the degree of successful implementation of the process is questionable. In a study published in 2010, Gavraet et al. (2010) propose a general analysis through student’s eye regarding the implementation status of the main Bologna action lines in Romania. Their conclusion is that reforms in the educational system must have as final goal the transition from a paradigm centered on teaching to student-centered education. Although promoted through public speeches and official studies, this goal is little

understood and internalized by the members of the academic community, including students. Reaching this goal requires not only adapting teaching methods, but attention directed towards the active participation of students in the learning process, in terms of their own choice of their educational path and of their involvement in redefining the curriculum and using the appropriate teaching methods.

One of the critical problems of the Romanian higher education system is the reduced rate of participation in training programs and professional development courses for employees, including here master programs [6]. This is the result of a low level of adjustment of Romanian higher education curricula to the labor market requirements, in terms of competencies obtained by graduates. Moreover, the effects of the recent global financial crisis on the Romanian educational system are still felt throughout and forced it to undergo through changes in order to better adapt to the requirements of the labor market. Thus, Romanian universities have to focus both on meeting the students' needs, as well the employers' needs with the purpose of accommodating both sides of the labor market. On the other hand, the students and graduates as well should participate actively in this process, mainly by providing active feedback to universities on how well the academic curricula is fitting to the labor market requirements – see Marin et al. (2015).

The paper highlights the experience of five master programs in Economics from two Romanian universities from Bucharest and Sibiu – Bucharest University of Economic Studies and “Lucian Blaga” University of Sibiu - in terms of curricula adjustments to the requirements of the labor market, emphasizing the most important curricular alterations and discussing their potential effects. The paper is structured as follows: Section 2 presents the main objectives of the project that supported these curricular developments, Section 3 outlines and discusses the adjustments in the curricula of the five master programs, while Section 4 concludes and draws directions for future actions.

Project overview – objectives and target groups

The project “Innovative Higher Education in Project Management using Modern Educational Techniques”, financed within the European Social Funds framework with a total amount of approximately 460,000 euro, is the result of a partnership between the Bucharest University of Economic Studies (BUES), the largest economics university in Romania, the “Lucian Blaga” University of Sibiu (LBUS) and an NGO – Alternatives for Performance Association, with expertise in the area of technology-driven educational programs. The project was implemented between May 2014 and November 2015 and had as main objective to improve the quality of

education offer for five master programs within the above-mentioned universities and to increase the attractiveness of continuing education for graduates of undergraduate studies by offering advanced programs, developing student-centered learning opportunities, aligning curricula with the requirements of the labor market and promoting modern methods of learning.

The project addresses students enrolled in five master programs delivered by the Faculty of International Business and Economics within the Bucharest University of Economic Studies (BUES) and the Faculty of Economic Sciences within “Lucian Blaga” University of Sibiu (LBUS). These students benefit as a result of project’s activities in the following ways: (i) the curricula of their study program was improved in order to include elective courses and modules of supplementary resources – the next section discusses these improvements in detail; (ii) all the courses and modules were delivered through the means of an e-learning platform – <http://pmllearning.ase.ro>, thus exposing students to innovative e-learning methods, which encouraged interactivity and the consolidation of decision-making skills; students’ feedback on the use of the e-learning platform has been encouraging, as a survey addressed to the students enrolled in the project shows – see Horobet and Belascu (2015); and (iii) a contest on Project Management topics was organized within the project and addressed to the students enrolled in the five master programs, with a total amount of 240,000 lei (approximately 53,000 Euros). Figure 1 presents the structure of the target group.

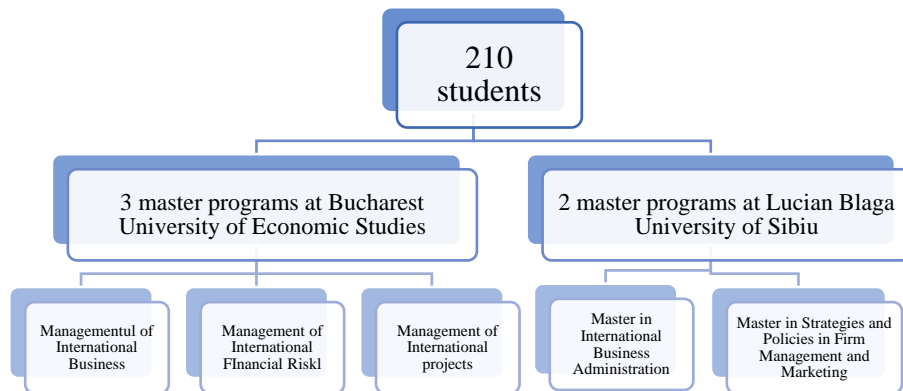


Figure 1: The structure of project's target group

Curriculum adjustments – focus on project management

A number of nine course or course modules were developed within the project, as follows: (i) three full courses – Management of intercultural projects, Management of big projects and programs and Management of IT projects; (ii) three modules of supplementary resources – Basics of Project

Management, Project Financial Management and Risk Management; and (iii) three complementary modules – Business Ethics, Equal Opportunities and Sustainable Development. Courses and module content and delivery design was prepared by the experts working in the project, and the decision regarding the number of hours allocated to each course and module was taken at project level, by discussions between all the experts and project management. Each full course has a total of 28 hours allocated per one semester (14 weeks of classes), while the supplementary and complementary resources modules have 6 hours allocated each. Table 1 presents briefly the learning objectives of each course and module.

Table 1: Courses and modules objectives

Course or module title	Course objectives
<i>Courses</i>	
Management of intercultural projects	Development of skills and abilities to work in multicultural teams or lead multicultural teams in an international context. The impact of culture on business, multicultural teams and their management. Typology and features of multicultural teams in the context of the overall business environment.
Management of big projects and programs	Development of the skills and abilities to work in large and complex programs and projects. Risks typical of large projects and programs and application of specific techniques to mitigate these risks. Governance structures required in large projects and programs. Planning in large projects and programs.
Management of IT projects	Development of skills and abilities to work in IT projects. Specific techniques to initiate IT projects. Elements necessary for planning IT projects. Risks for IT projects. Monitoring IT projects.
<i>Supplementary resources modules</i>	
Basics of Project Management	Definition of project and project-oriented management benefits. Setting goals for projects. Basics of project budget. The role of the project manager. Implementation, monitoring and project closure. Closing the project.
Project Financial Management	Cost-benefit analysis: assessment and evaluation tool for economic projects. Financial and economic analysis of projects. Project budget - development, sensitivity analysis, stress testing.
Risk Management	Identification of project specific risks. Qualitative and qu-antitative risk analysis. Development of a risk response plan.
<i>Complementary resources modules</i>	
Business Ethics	Business ethics – the reference framework. Violation of basic employment rights. Disregard of the health and safety rules and regulations. Fraud. Bias. Blaming others. Disadvantageous choices regarding contracts.
Equal Opportunities	Equal opportunities and project management. Types of discrimination. Prejudice and project management. How harness diversity? The See-Do-Get Model.
Sustainable Development	Development of the concept of sustainable development. Sustainable development principles and applicability to project management. Elements considered by the project manager in applying the principles of sustainable development.

Following the courses and modules design, a number of eight experts in the project (Curricular experts and Course directors) studied the existing curricula of the five master programs and proposed changes aimed at including some or all of the courses and modules. The changes were proposed

in a manner that would build and consolidate students' competences. It should be noted that the three full courses were offered to students as electives, while the supplementary and complementary modules were integrated in existing courses and, as a result, they were compulsory. Table 2 presents these curricular improvements for each master program, mentioning the year of study where they were included and the total number of hours allocated for each course or course module.

Table 2: Curricular improvements

Type	Status	Number of hours	Number	Integration
Elective courses	Elective	28 hours/semester – 14 hours/course and 14 hours/seminar	11	5 for 1st year – BUES 6 for 2nd year – 2 at BUES and 4 at ULBS
Modules of supplementary resources	Compulsory – integrated in existing courses	6 hours/semester – course or seminar	9	5 for 1 st year – 4 at BUES and 1 at ULBS 4 for 2 nd year –ULBS
Modules of complementary resources	Compulsory – integrated in existing courses	6 hours/semester – course or seminar	12	7 for 1st year – 5 at BUES and 2 at ULBS 5 for 2nd year – 2 at BUES and 3 at ULBS

It can be observed that a number of 5 elective courses were introduced in the curricula for 1st year students – all at BUES and none at ULBS, while 6 elective courses were proposed for 2nd year students – 4 at ULBS and 2 at BUES. For what concerns the modules of supplementary resources, 5 such modules were introduced as compulsory components of courses for 1st year students – of which 4 at BUES and 1 at ULBS, while a number of 4 modules were proposed for 2nd year students, all of them at ULBS. Also, 7 modules of complementary resources were introduced in 1st year courses – 5 at BUES and 2 at ULBS, and 5 modules were introduced in 2nd year courses – 2 at BUES and 3 at ULBS.

Overall, the changes in the curricula of all five master programs were balanced, in order to expose students from both years to topics in Project Management and related areas and to address those changes to the highest possible number of students. It is also important to mention that the content of elective courses and modules addressed both specialty and transversal competencies, thus leading to a comprehensive contribution to students' preparation.

Conclusion

As the field of Project Management gained more prominence on the Romanian labor market, the need for graduates skilled in Project Management increased in the past year, thus leading to the initiative of providing students enrolled in master programs in Economics, but with different specializations, courses and topics in Project Management. All five master programs included all elective full courses and supplementary and

complementary modules in their curricula, for both first and second year students. The outcomes in terms of students' employability as a result of acquiring knowledge and skills in Project Management remain to be discerned in the years to come, but students' opinions so far are positive and encouraging for us.

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