

Some considerations on adapting academic qualifications to the Romanian labor market

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Abstract. The paper presents the results of some research carried out by the authors during the activities of the "Academic Entrepreneurial Laboratory – Progress through Innovation and Practice – (Univers Practic)" and seeks to evince certain key aspects pertaining to the adaptation of university qualifications to the needs of the Romanian workforce. First, the general context of higher education and the current state of affairs, as reflected by the analysis of relevant works in the field are presented. This is followed by a presentation of the main results of a questionnaire-based study that evinces the opinions of students, graduates, and company managers with regard to the necessity of adapting academic qualifications to the Romanian labor market. Lastly, the conclusions of the paper are delineated and several recommendations concerning the relationship of universities with the business environment and other stakeholders are elaborated, with the aim of improving the interactions of the university with the entire society.

1 Introduction

The contemporary university has more functions than we might be tempted to believe at a first glance. The expectations of modern society, based on the principle of democratic freedoms, the market economy, and the competition between operators activating on the same segment of socio-economic life cannot be satisfied except through the concomitant exercising of functions that any higher education institution should endeavor. Of all these functions, the formative and the one of ensuring the occupational mobility of the workforce are often understood, nuanced, and exercised differently depending on the context in which each university operates.

The extremely dynamic social, political, economic, and cultural context of the last 50 – 60 years has had a powerful impact on the quality of higher education. In their race to acquire students and resources, the providers of academic studies have adopted various attitudes and strategies. The consequences are easily noticeable in many countries with diversified higher education systems. While traditional universities have striven to maintain their conduct in assuring the quality of the academic education, many recent providers of study programs have relegated the quality of the education offered to a secondary position. Commercial, financial, or personal interests have prevailed and continue to do so in many of the more recent entities that compete against the traditional academic offer.

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Given this fluid context of higher education, during the latter part of the 1970s, the first quality accreditation authorities have appeared in various European countries and beyond the Old Continent. This way, *the quality of higher education is defined and ensured not by the university, but by entities outside the university*. Some countries initially chose to relegate this public responsibility to ministries or departments of higher education. Subsequently it was proven that too often the license to operate and / or the accreditation resulted in the atrocious encroachment on university autonomy.

In many of the academic systems of developed, but also emerging countries, to constitute an authority – either independent or under the patronage of the authorities – has been deemed to be a much more suitable formula of ensuring the quality of the recent providers of academic education and study programs, especially given that these authorities were not operating with public servants, but rather invited teaching staff from traditional universities, and sometimes academic experts from abroad, in order to carry out peer-review academic evaluations.

2 The current status of higher education within the context of the European Union

In order to formulate the study entitled “Analysis of the Need to Adapt the Academic Curriculum to the Competences Demanded by the Labor Market and the Improvement of Relationships with Internship Partners”, the authors of the paper have analyzed numerous papers relevant to the study matter. As a result of the analysis carried out in [1], corroborated with the information presented in [2] and [3], the authors’ opinion was shaped with regard to the current status of the Romanian learning system from the perspective of adapting it to the current needs of society, which is succinctly presented hereafter.

The Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ARACIS) operating in Romania has a vital role in ensuring and improving the quality of the education provided by Romanian institutions of higher education. Also, at European level, The European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) disseminates information, experiences, and good practices in the field of quality assurance in higher education, to European quality assurance agencies, public authorities, and higher education institutions.

In Europe, the reference instrument required to compare the levels of competence of the various national qualification systems has been constituted by EQF - The European Qualifications Framework. The latter promotes both life-long learning, and the equality of chances in the knowledge-based society, as well as the continuous integration with the European labor market, honoring at the same time the great diversity of national education systems. In our country, the National Framework of Qualifications (CNC), together with the National Registry of Qualifications (RNC) are in operation, having been elaborated, updated, and implemented by the National Authority of Qualifications (ANC). A special space within it is occupied by higher education, for the purpose of which the National Framework of Qualifications in Romania (CNCIS) and the National Registry of Qualifications in Higher Education (RNCIS) are distinguished. CNCIS is the instrument used in establishing the structure of qualifications in higher education, and is intended to ensure the coherency of qualifications and titles obtained from higher education. At the same time, CNCIS ensures national recognition, as well as international compatibility and comparability of higher education qualifications.

In the years following the signing of the 1999 Bologna Declarations, universities and their academic communities have understood better and better that it is in their interest to consolidate the internal assurance of quality; they need to promote the transparency of their own measures of increasing quality expressed in the form of learning results and they need to develop a new communication strategy with their circles of stakeholders outside the

academic environment, involving them in the development of institutional strategies, in the design of new study programs that best and most visibly answer their demands and expectations.

The reports of certain pieces of qualitative research from various fields of the business environment illustrate a variety of practices coming from both employers and providers of higher education [2]. There are certain examples of practices that perpetuate the specific discrepancies between academic qualifications and workplace demands, just as there are good practices based on the dialogue between universities and the business environment through which discrepancies are eliminated. Discrepancies are materialized either through the over-qualification or overspecialization of the graduate (given that the market does not absorb such specialists, it needing execution specialists of certain decisional options), or through the insufficient training of the graduate (in the context of the need that specialists from different fields be able to interact in order to carry out the tasks in their workplace).

Changes in the nature of the qualification demand are often dictated by labor market constraints or market pressures. In general, it is a known fact that workforce planning is too loosely actively connected to long- or medium-term business planning [2]. On the other hand, educational providers, especially universities, ought to be more sensitive to the needs of a permanently changing labor market. This requires on the one hand, to strengthen the dialogue with employers and other stakeholders in the process of elaborating a new curriculum and in the delivery of study programs, as well as to improve communication with the rest of society, in order to make higher education reforms better understood. On the other hand, to alter the institutional culture of quality in universities, so as the employability of graduates may become a key problem of education / training to each member of the academic community (instructor, researcher, student, alumnus, and member of the administrative staff).

Within the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) there is raised awareness of the fact that the concern for quality must lie at the center of the system. On the whole it is a known fact that quality assurance in higher education consists of a set of measures and actions meant to augment the institutional capability of elaborating, planning, and putting into practice study programs, all of which should convince the beneficiary that the learning provider fulfills the appropriate quality standards. Ensuring quality reflects the provider's capability of offering study programs which are in accordance with the standards that they have mentioned beforehand. In order to manage the issue of quality, the academic learning provider must run a continuous quality-monitoring internal process which is to be extended to every component of the teaching – learning process.

The current state of higher education in our country has always been – and still is – determined by a series of limitations, but also by the general context of Romanian society. Concerning the general strategy of higher education, the overall perspectives of the educational system, together with the salient transformations that have occurred in Romanian society over the past few decades have been left out.

It is necessary that the shift occur from the traditional, inertial learning system that has been in force hitherto, to that learning system marked by radical changes, by the synchrony with the latest and future developments, the compliance with the 1999 Bologna and 2003 Berlin Declarations, as well as with the Law of National Education. The process of radical renewal of the higher education is vital; otherwise, to neglect to achieve this process is to risk generating long-term effects that will be hard to correct. This process is generated mainly by three factors: increasing the individual request of higher education – the shift from selective to mass higher education occurs; the labor market – it is noticeable that there exist significant chasms between the qualifications demanded by the labor market and the ones provided by universities; the information and communication technologies – which ensure the fundamental resources for the intensification of the socio-economic development.

In this context, the concern with aligning the workforce with the new socio-economic specific conditions must become a primary concern. The qualifications obtained by higher education graduates have to match the demands of the labor market – which undergoes increasingly dynamic changes – as faithfully as possible.

3 Adapting the university curriculum to the competences demanded by the Romanian labor market

The conceptual – methodological model of describing qualifications in higher education (the CNCIS model) represents a reference framework which was developed to analyze, describe, and interpret higher education qualifications (according to the OMECTS 5703/2011 order of the Ministry of Education. The CNCIS model is generally compliant with the vision put forth by the European Qualifications Framework (EQF), and with the learning results specified by the latter for qualification levels 6, 7, and 8. The structure and content of the model valorize the descriptors of the general qualifications framework regulating the European space of higher education, as well as the containing elements of models that already enjoy the appreciation of European experts. At the same time, the CNCIS model has its own identity; it integrates types and categories of competences, levels of qualifications, and specific descriptors.

The essential elements of the model resulted in the CNCIS Matrix and the complementary grids: Grid 1 (the description of the field / higher education study program through professional and transversal competences), Grid 1s (specific descriptive elements of the field / study program), and Grid 2 (establishing the correlations between competences and transversal competences and content areas; study disciplines and credits assigned). The CNCIS Matrix comprises: qualification levels, learning results expressed through knowledge, abilities, and competences, as well as the level descriptors of higher education qualifications.

The procedure to be followed by higher education institutions in order to gain the right to certify a qualification achieved by their graduates is schematized in Figure 1. Universities need to initiate the procedure by putting together a validation file for every qualification achieved upon graduating from an academic study program; the file will then be forwarded to the National Authority of Qualifications (ANC). ANC, in consultation with ARACIS and the Ministry of Higher Education (MEN), and by taking into account the demands of the labor market (the way in which this occurs is not explained), evaluates the documentation received and certifies (or refuses to do so) the university qualification in question, by registering it (or not, as the case may be) with CNCIS/RNCIS and notifying the university with regard to the resolution reached.

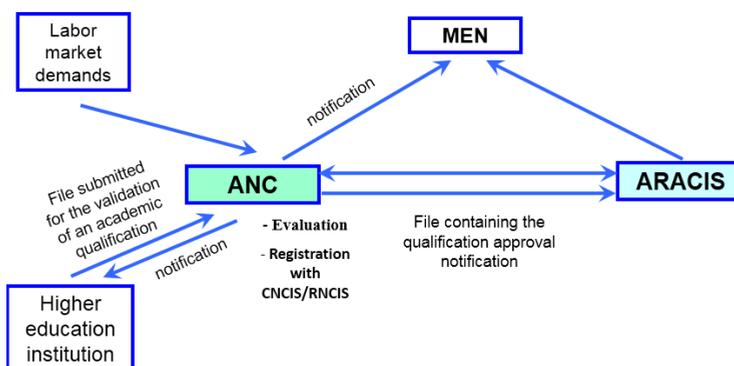


Fig. 1. The certification procedure of a professional academic qualification

The previously described current procedure presents certain obvious shortcomings that directly affect the labor market. On the one hand, the demands of the labor market are not fully addressed, whereas the information that the ANC possesses is debatable with regard to its degree of actuality. On the other hand, no attention is paid to the opinion of the future students or alumni. These categories of people could make useful contributions to the more rigorous and more complete definition of a professional academic qualification. Furthermore, the ANC is constituted along the lines of a public institution having a juridical personality and being in a position of coordination with MEN, which leads to subjectivity, since the ANC can no longer be considered as a third party in the relationship of universities with MEN.

In order to forward the validation file of a professional academic qualification, universities must first clarify the defining elements of the respective qualifications, by explaining professional roles, occupations, competences, competence units and study disciplines.

Detailing a professional academic qualification must start from the identification of obvious needs that appear due to the evolution of the labor force market. Once the necessity and opportunity of a new qualification has been clarified, one must delineate the possible professional roles and occupations of the people attending the respective qualification, which must comply with the Classification of Occupations in Romania and with the International Standard Classification of Occupations (ISCO-88). Afterwards, the (general and specific) professional and transversal competences, the competence units and study disciplines, together with their content and share are clarified (refer to the methodology described in Annex OMECTS 5703/2011).

Not until an academic qualification has been certified can one proceed to organize the educational student training process in accordance with the exigencies of the respective qualification. Interested universities will have to undergo the internal quality evaluation concerning the institutional capability, educational efficiency, and quality management, according to the ARACIS evaluation methodology. Following this is the external evaluation carried out by ARACIS at the request of universities, and based on the current legislation, methodology, guides, and procedures. Subsequent to the external evaluation, ARACIS recommends the provisional authorization or accreditation of higher education and study programs providers.

Harmonizing the demand and supply in the field of the labor market cannot be left up to the state, the university, or employers. This is a social problem, on which all of our lives depend. Since it is everyone's problem, it is only natural that everyone should contribute to it and collaborate in a productive way in order to solve it. The opinions of everyone must be considered valuable and, by integrating them, together with the collected accountability, the best decisions have to be made and consistent work must be done to implement them, in order to ensure the durable development of the entire society.

The continuous development of the labor market will undoubtedly prompt the periodic review of the professional academic qualifications. At the same time, all stakeholders will have to work together to carry out the periodic review of professional academic qualifications, as mentioned above.

Compared to the certification procedure of a professional academic qualification, shown in Figure 1, we recognize that the definition and review of a qualification can be done in a much better way by consulting the main stakeholders concerned with the activity of universities: employers and the students / alumni. This aspect can be schematically presented as shown in Figure 2.

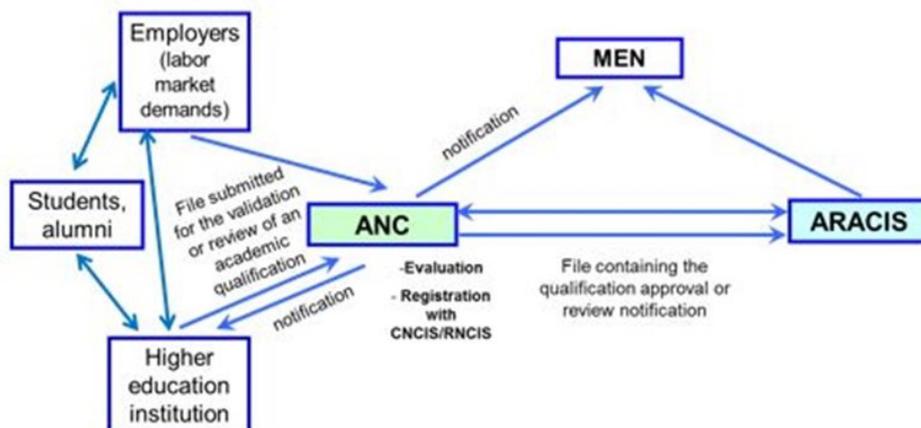


Fig. 2. Defining and reviewing a professional academic qualification – proposal

In order to further illustrate this point of view, a research has been carried out targeting the harmonization of specialty structures (program studies) from Romanian universities with the labor market, by taking into account the employers' opinions – expressed by the managers of the employing organizations – and the opinions of Romanian students and alumni. For the purpose of the research, the subjects were questioned in connection with the necessary knowledge and competences, by avoiding (so as not to generate misunderstandings) the usage of the concept of competence with the meaning employed by CNCIS.

4 A few results of a study concerning the need of adapting academic qualifications to the needs of the Romanian labour market

What actually happened within the "Academic Entrepreneurial Laboratory – Progress through Innovation and Practice – (UniversPractic)" project that took place in 2014 – 2015 at Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu was a series of opinion polls resulting in three strategic documents relating to the theme of the project, one of them being none other than paper [1]. Two of the polls sought to determine the opinions of students and alumni (on the one hand) and of the employers (on the other hand) regarding the adaptation of academic qualifications to the needs of the Romanian labor market. The polls, exhaustively presented in [1], were conceived so that the probability of guaranteeing the results of the research (the level of trust) be 95%, and the margin of error $\pm 5\%$. To collect the information, two questionnaires were utilized, one addressed to students and alumni, and the other to firm managers, the latter being deemed as relevant representatives of the employers. The researched has brought about the collection of some very interesting information, some of which will be presented over the next lines.

Both categories of subjects reveal similar opinions concerning the training provided by the universities. What became evident was that the professional training was prevalingly theoretical, whereas the practical and applicative training was deficient. As concerns a good theoretical training, both students and managers shared similar opinions, whereas, with regard to the practical and applicative training, managers were more critical (given that their answer encapsulates the actual situation in their companies), whereas the students were less aware of this aspect.

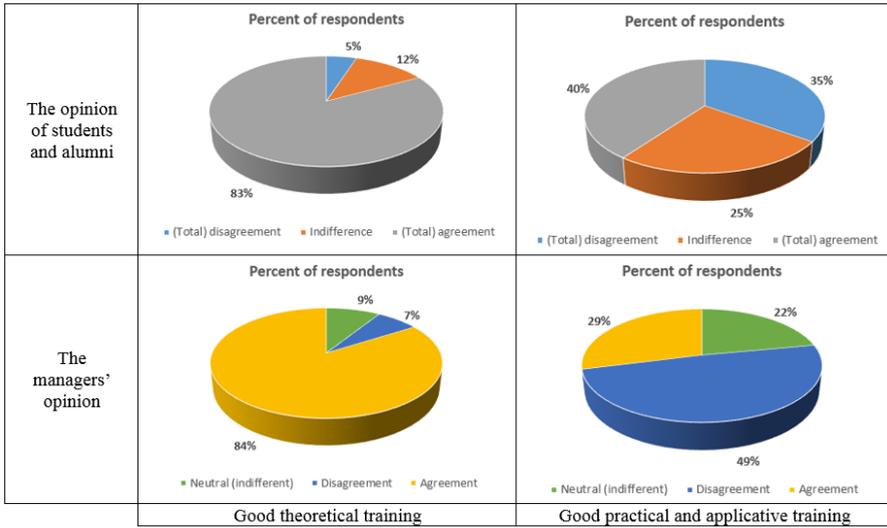


Fig. 3. The opinions of respondents regarding the professional training offered by universities

The main skills needed in practicing one's profession, according to students and alumni, are the ones shown in Figure 4. These do not exactly coincide with the opinions of the managers about the same issue (Figure 5), the latter being aware of the fact that college graduates successfully pursue their professional training after being hired by the company, so long as they possess communication and teamwork skills, corroborated with solid computer-operating skills and with the proficiency in speaking some international languages.

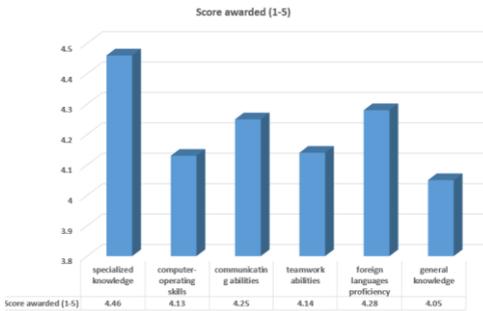


Fig. 4. The opinion of students and alumni concerning the main skill needed to practice one's profession

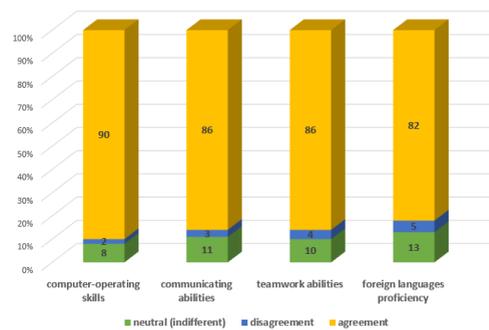


Fig. 5. The opinion of managers concerning the main skills needed to practice one's profession

A considerable number of students and alumni questioned (58%) consider that the professional training accrued in university, although exceptionable, enhances their chances of immigration, especially within the European Union. At the same time, the questioned subjects argue that certain undertakings are necessary to increase the quality of higher education (72%) and to adapt it to the needs of society (86%).

Managers estimate that there is a 73% chance that over the next few years universities will adapt their educational offers to the demands of the labor market and a 74% chance that the Romanian higher education system become more flexible. 71% of the managers assume that the Romanian higher education system will significantly increase its quality over the next 5 – 10 years, especially thanks to Romania's integration in the European Community (78% of the respondents indicate this as a main reason).

5 Conclusions

The generalizing conclusion is that post-1990 society has undergone a rapid evolution in various respects – economic, social, political, informational, internationalizing, etc. – and that universities – Romanian universities, in particular – failed to keep up with the social dynamic, the rapid change in the context of highly qualified labor market, social and individual expectations of university education beneficiaries. It is no less true that, in spite of isolated warnings coming from the very bosom of the academic world [2], the contemporary university has opened itself up very little, showing a vacillating professionalism and a diminished enthusiasm for the world around it, and engaging in feeble dialogue with the society it serves, often falling behind in the competition against other providers of tertiary training [2].

The main conclusions concerning the adaptation of academic qualifications to the Romanian labor market, resulting both from this paper, as well as from papers [1-2] are the following: the university qualifications achieved upon graduation from current study programs are not completely underpinned by the demands of the labor market; there is no objective underpinning at study program / field level of certain appropriate measures targeting the adaptation of the current study offer to the demands of the labor market; the universities' dialogue with business associations and employers, students and the teaching body, as well as other stakeholders is deficient.

There are two strategic directions to be followed by Romanian universities. The first direction requires focusing on the actual and efficient implementation of a continuous internal operative monitoring mechanism (semester by semester, lecture by lecture), aimed at ensuring the quality of academic training. Similar to other European higher education systems, the Romanian one is in dire need of a new quality culture in each university and throughout the whole system. The new quality culture must be founded on the strategic option of real and objective openness towards the society, actively promoted from within the university.

The second strategic direction entails the development of an active and continuous dialogue (initiated by the university) that involves all stakeholders and demands the honest and continuous collaboration with the latter. The consultation of representative actors from the ranks of the employers, as well as the maintenance of contact with alumni associations, are now perceived as efficient means of learning the needs of the labor market, and also of educating it, so that the proper understanding of the complex system of academic qualifications, subsequent to the three Bologna academic study cycles, may occur. The presence of partners from the business environment, public administration institutions, business associations, as well as the ranks of former students, is likely to stimulate the debate and identification of means of adapting the study offer to the needs and expectations specific to the highly-qualified labor market.

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