



## HIGHER ROMANIAN EDUCATION POST-BOLOGNA: REQUIRED CHANGES, INSTRUMENTS AND ETHICAL ISSUES

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**Abstract:** In 1999 Romania became part of the Bologna process, focused on the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System, design to increase the compatibility of European universities, ensuring the mobility of students and professors in the context of re-orienting education to the formation of competences continuously adapted to market requirements. This model draws the new education system closer to American education. The paper analyzes the importance of evaluation, proposing solutions to increase teaching efficiency, and also the often negative influence of promotion criteria, based on their characteristic ethical aspects. The paper underlines the importance of continuous evaluation based on more requirements, resulting into a more correct assessment of performance, but also the evaluation of the efficiency of the course and instructor by the students, proposing its assignment to an independent structure to diminish the bias of results. The paper also analyses the importance of promotion criteria based on the scientific activity and management of research in the detriment of focusing on teaching. The implications relate to the fact that management of research does not measure teaching performance or the professional profile, while scientometric measurements of results have profound ethical consequences, leading to a distorted scientific behavior and neglected teaching duties.

**Key words:** education, credits, competences, evaluation, performance

### 1. Introduction

The Ministries of Education from 29 European countries, gathered in Bologna, Italy signed on 19 June 1999 a Convention focused on enhancing the compatibility of European universities. Its key point is the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System - ECTS (Confederation of EU Rectors' Conferences and the Association of European Universities, 2000). The credit transfer is facilitated by the quantification of learning results: what does a student know, understand and is able to do after a course, what is the workload, but also how are the workload and course perceived overall (Directorate-General for Education and Culture, 2005).

The difference between the ECTS and previous models consists on the fact that the first is a flexible system focused on the student and based on the workload needed on behalf of the student in order to meet the goals of an educational program, preferably specified in relationship to the learning processes and acquired competences (Directorate-General for Education and Culture, 2004), that should replace, at least in the Romanian education, accumulation of theoretical and practical knowledge. Expressed very simply, the students must be able to hammer a nail instead of describing the structure of the hammer or its usage. Another characteristic of the ECTS is the mobility of students and instructors, tightly related to mechanisms for providing compatibility among courses, but also between practical abilities and habits. In other words, regardless of where, who, or how teaches a course, or what does it contain, equivalent courses must be compared by obtaining the same competences at similar levels after a successful pass.

A student successfully passing a course is "credited" in the ECTS system with the number of credit units assigned to it (International Programs for Students, 2006) determined by several parameters, such as workload, learning results, and the number of hours spent in contact with the instructor (Directorate-General for Education and Culture, 2004), or, in the American system, the workload

regardless of the final score (Illinois Institute of Technology, 2006; Orientation Services, 2008), time spent in class (Mercer, 2006; International Programs for Students, 2006; Orientation Services, 2008), a passing grade (Orientation Services, 2008), the academic level of the course (Mercer, 2006) or its “value” (Gerhard, 1955). In summary, a weighted average of the value and level of the course and the time spent for it is used. The number of credit units is used in American higher education as a weight for computing the general average, GPA - Grade Point Average (International Programs for Students, 2006).

It has often been stated that the reform of European education, started with the Bologna conference, envisages the American model (Newman, 2006; Dragomirescu and Drane, 2007). With respect to the latter, the first cycle (Bachelor's degree) is focused on acquiring information in school, and, in parallel, on developing social abilities in student associations, such as the Greeks (fraternities and sororities). The Master's degree is centered on practical abilities (using specific instruments, software and methods to solve real problems) in school and accumulation of professional experience outside, while the doctorate implies effective research, resulting into conference presentations and/or published papers. Post-doctoral studies add the management of research (Petrișor and Rusu-Burg, 2010).

Different types of abilities, developed during the three cycles (Bachelor - Master's - Doctorate) imply a differentiation of specific competences in a dynamic manner, adapted to the requirements of the market and to the progress of science and technology (Filip-Ciubotaru et al., 2010). These elements also assume a continuous assessment of the efficiency of courses, by checking if instructional targets were met looking at the performance of the students (in a double way, since the efficiency of the instructor is also assessed), but also at their perception by the receivers, i.e., the evaluation of the course and instructor by students. Unfortunately, even though the usage of questionnaires is recommended (Bădescu, 2009), there is no unitary model. In fact, it would be difficult to create such a model, since the comparison based on the same instrument of theoretical and practical, more or less exact sciences and literary-artistic disciplines is virtually impossible. Nevertheless, the principle is still valid: courses must permanently adapt to changes of the competences to be developed, given their market and societal value (Jurše and Tominc, 2008). Moreover, accounting, in addition, for the rapid theoretical and methodological evolution of sciences in the knowledge-based society, the continuous professional improvement (Bădescu, 2009) and adaptation of pedagogic methods represent necessities for the instructor. In this context, the transmission of a message must be related to the interest of the auditorium or its educational value (Bădescu et al., 2009), moving from a monologue to communication, understood, according to its Latin etymology, as sharing or dialogue.

In summary, the requirements of the Bologna process translate into a continuous transformation of the didactic activity in order to meet the needs of the students and help them adapt to the market upon the completion of studies. Such changes transform one-time events (final examinations) into a continuous process and force the instructor to update the contents of the class and teaching methods permanently. Nevertheless, the same instructor is subject to periodic evaluations and his promotion depends on other activities than teaching. This paper aims to examine all the activities of an instructor, as resulting from the contents of promotion and periodic evaluation criteria, comparing the American and Romanian education systems through the ethical consequences of the collateral activities over the teaching performance of an instructor.

## **2. Evaluation of the students' activity by the instructor**

The performance signifies the level of theoretical and practical abilities acquired in a class, and cannot be measured exactly, among others due to the fact that it is a continuous variable. This is why a grading system is used instead.

The performance of individuals forming a sufficiently large homogeneous sample, receiving uniform education, follows a Gaussian distribution. The 10-scores system was conceived to cover different levels of performance; in objective grading, corresponding to the Normal distribution, 69% of the students must pass (Dragomirescu and Drane, 2007). Also, given that scores measure performance, punishing plagiarism (a disciplinary issue) with a score of 1 is incorrect. The American system punishes indiscipline by disciplinary sanctions (expelling) and not by the score.

The American grading system is cumulative, meaning that the final grade is a weighted average of scores from partial and final examinations, assignments, essays etc. during the semester. The difference from the Romanian system is the lack of flexibility when the passing criteria pertaining to each component are not met, e.g., partial examinations are obligatory and can be scheduled only in very strict and special conditions (serious health issues etc.), or assignments turned in passed the deadline results into partial or total loss of the grade assigned to them. This is why in graduate education the passing grade generally corresponds to 7 in the Romanian system (International Programs for Students, 2006). Due to the existence of a large number of “probes” during the semester and to the schedule that determines the clustering of tests from different courses in the same period, most American examinations are written. The lack of oral examinations reduces the ability of students to communicate; due to this reason, those envisaging teaching or research (involving the presentation of results in conferences) must take special classes in communication.

Changes in Romanian economy and education after 1989 led to the emergence of several new types of students in addition to the “classic” ones (who were hired only after the completion of studies): either employed people who continue their education, students who get hired or study in more than one school or university at the same time (Dragomirescu, 2007). In general, these people tend to have reduced attendance during the semester and report only to the final examination.

Bonuses granted during the course in order to allow for the “compensation” of scores reduced due to the mistakes or unfulfilled tasks are also present in American higher education, but only as additional questions in the final (written) examination, not exceeding 20% of the score. The American grading system allows for a more correct evaluation of the performance, while bonuses granted in each class increase its attractiveness, according to the objectives of Bologna (Confederation of EU Rectors’ Conferences and the Association of European Universities, 2000), and satisfies in addition the demands related to continuous learning and evaluation. Personal teaching experience indicates that the distribution of scores tends to be normalized as the number of tasks increases.

At the end of each class taught since 2007, students are asked to fill in the aforementioned questionnaire that will be described later. Answers to the question, “What were the positive and negative aspects of the course?” show that the grading system was better received by students taking more exigently graded classes and not noticed by classes where the indulgence was higher. Similar aspects were described based on 2002-2005 evaluations in the book by Dragomirescu and Drane (2007), describing the use of a similar system since 1991.

In summary, several ethical issues must be pointed out. The first one is a question whether an instructor should be “leaning” or “tough” when grading the students. The implications are both individual and societal. Individually, a “leaning” grading will discourage top students, who find out that their efforts are not reflected by the scores compared to the ones obtained by their peers and will prevent students who perform poorly and pass the class to analyze and improve their activity. At the societal level, a “leaning” grading could be assimilated to a malfunctioning of a factory that releases defective products due to an insufficient final quality check (Dragomirescu, 2007; Dragomirescu and Drane, 2007). The second ethical issue relates to sanctioning disciplinarily misconducts such as cheating and plagiarism, with severe societal implications (Astărăstoae, 2005). Students who simply fail an examination due to these issues will pass it the next time, but they will have no overall effect, neither for the student, nor for the society (Osborn, 2000).

### **3. Promotion and periodic evaluation of the teaching staff**

In the American system, until the final granting of the “tenured” status to a member of the teaching staff, his/her activity is continuously monitored every 1-2 years, and unsatisfactory performance can lead to firing, especially under budgetary constraints. The criteria used are, given their importance, the management of research, effective research (including publications and citations), and teaching; in addition, secondary performance criteria include positions within the administrative structures of the universities or professional organizations. The same criteria are used in Romanian research and education system (David, 2006b; Arnold School of Public Health, 2009). Research management translates into a purely materialistic question: how much money does a professor bring to the

department, school or university from research grants? The evaluation of research is based on authored publications, and teaching performance is based on questionnaire distributed by the university (excluding the instructor) after each course to the students. The pressure exercised by these criteria against the instructors results from the fact that, in addition to their instructional activity, the universities are centers of innovation, promoting the knowledge-based economy according to the goals established by the Lisbon and Gothenburg strategies of the European Union (Ianoș and Heller, 2006).

### 3.1. Evaluation of research management

The inclusion of this criterion among those evaluating the competence of an instructor in both American and Romanian education systems (especially for the rank of Professor in the latter) should look at least bizarre. If the evaluation of teaching activity is justified by the fact that a professor is meant for teaching (and unfortunately in both the American and Romanian system this criterion has the lowest importance), and the evaluation of research activities measures the competence in the field that is taught (at least since writing a paper involves a review of the literature) - Bădescu, 2009, the criterion related to research management measures something completely different, and represents an illustration of Lawrence J. Peter's principle, "In a hierarchy every employee tends to rise to his level of incompetence" - Peter, 1999; Lazear, 2001). A corollary of this principle is constituted by two of "(Edward) Murphy's laws" (Bloch, 1991): "Those who can, do; those who can't, teach" (H. L. Mencken's rule), while "Those who cannot teach, administrate or lead" (Martin's extension). Their application is illustrated by the following parable: "Peter was the best gardener. He was proposed to become chief gardener, but refused arguing that he is a gardener, is competent in gardening, and this is his maximum competence, not organizing the work of gardeners, that is a different domain where his efficiency is lowered" (Văduva, 2003). In other words, a good researcher or teacher is not necessarily a good manager. Furthermore, in order to create the infrastructure required for evaluating the research, top specialists will be asked to evaluate research grants in specialized committees during a time when, given their experience already proven, could have done true research. The erroneous identification of the purpose of science with the attraction of funds and economic impact, and actions taken accordingly could be deleterious (Corlan, 2005; Hîncu et al., 2009). In the particular case of Romania, defective procedural issues resulted into substantial funding of over 400 complex research projects in 2005, although it is impossible to have 400 centers of excellence in a country with low research performances (David, 2006).

From an ethical standpoint, the mixture of criteria represents an example of evaluation based on double standards (Pienaar and Bester, 2006). Moreover, the balance between the scientific relevance of research results and their practical applicability (Hîncu et al., 2009) can hardly be maintained under the constant pressure for developing research projects when the funding is in deficit and the competition increases.

### 3.2. Evaluation of the research activity

In order to measure the value of research, scientometric indicators similar to the impact factors are used. The critiques of this system are increasingly frequent. According to Lawrence (2007), in the last 20 years, the primary purpose of a scientist became to produce papers and publish them in the "best" journals instead of making research. The performance is based on the number of citations; a wrong paper will "look good" on the author's vita since there is no differentiation between citing a "good" and a wrong papers, and truly innovative papers need over two years to receive appreciation. Many times a paper is cited, but other papers analyzing it are actually read, and authors read the fifth part of the papers they cite. Moreover, scientometric indicators do not measure the contribution of a scientist, but his presence on the list of authors.

All these determined the emergence of unethical behaviors: (1) publishing in high-impact journals: papers are sent first there, regardless of the true value of research, and resubmitted to lower-impact journals only after rejection; (2) submission to journals from "fashionable" domains, even if it is not the case, in order to receive faster and more citations; (3) exaggerated importance of contributions, splitting a study in more papers ("salami slicing"), combining results, ignoring or eliminating those not

supportive, simplification of conclusions and citations of many references; (4) work in large groups - papers are always signed by the leaders, while the others swap their order; (5) extended connections with other researchers, potential coauthors or reviewers, participation for the same reason in conferences; (6) the selection favors those ready to exploit the other, while the least aggressive loose (Lawrence, 2007). While the instructors are involved in research (effectively or managing grants) instead of teaching, younger students tend to be neglected, and doctoral students become technicians - they are told what to do and cannot act independently. In addition, professors correct their papers, rewrite and reinterpret the results without knowing how these were obtained (Lawrence, 2007).

### 3.3. Evaluation of the course and instructor by students

In the American system, the objectivity of evaluations is provided by several mechanisms. First, evaluations are carried on by the university, and not by the instructor. A member of the teaching staff, neither the instructor, nor his assistants, come to the final examination, distribute and collect the questionnaires, and analyze the anonymous answers. Therefore, students know that their answers do not influence the score, since the instructor, if applicable, is allowed to see the answers only after communicating the final grades.

Since the Romanian education system specifies only the need for evaluation (Bădescu, 2009) without providing any instruments, Petrișor (2009) asked students to fill in the questionnaire in order to help improving the course for the next series, bringing the answers to the final oral exam and handing them after finding out the final score, diminishing the possible influence of the final score on the evaluations and the “fear” or “hope” that answers could affect negatively, respectively positively the final grade. The questionnaire consists of 35 multiple choice items, most using a Likert scale with 5 options: 1: totally disagree, 2: disagree, 3: neutral/not applicable, 4: agree, 5: totally agree, and 5 open questions. The instrument allowed for underlining the perception of changes in the contents of the course, teaching methodologies including the evaluation, comparing the same course when taught by more instructors, and assessing the overall teaching activity (Petrișor, 2009).

The ethical issues related to this evaluation mechanism envisage two directions, but have a common solution. On the one hand, objective evaluations are needed, without any influence of the intent of students to hide negative aspects fearing possible repression or exaggerate the positive ones hoping to improve the final score, and also there is a need to reduce the influence of evaluations on final grades, if the instructor recognizes individual answers or sees the global results, when evaluations precede the communication of final grades (Dragomirescu and Drane, 2007). On the other hand, the revenge trends must also be prevented: students could exaggerate negative aspects if they are not pleased with the final score or over-praise the course and instructor if the final score is better than expected. Both problems can be resolved if the evaluation is managed, similar to the American system, by the university, independent of the instructor (University of South Carolina, 2010).

## 4. Conclusion

Meeting the requirements phrased at Bologna implies reorienting the didactic approach from communicating information to forming the ability to use knowledge at the Bachelor's and Master's level, and develop it at the doctoral level. These changes assume a continuous measurement of the efficiency of developing competences by a continuous assessment of the activity of students, but also of their perception of the course and activity of the instructor. Nevertheless, the current promotion system induces a competition between teaching activities on the one hand, and effective research and management of research on the other hand. The pressure imposed by the means of evaluating if the latest two criteria are met resulted into behaviors contrary to the scientific ethics and diminished teaching efficiency.

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