

## **The Innovating Triangle in Teaching European Studies: Trends, Legal Regulations, Vocations**

**Valentina Cornea<sup>1</sup>**

**Abstract:** The Report to the European Commission on Improving the quality of teaching and learning in Europe's higher education institutions (June 2013) and the activity from INOTLES project serves the starting point for this study. The title of the report has generated the basic question of this study – innovation in teaching is adopted under the influence of trends, it is supported/required by national legislation or it is just a vocation. In this regard, the first section contains an overview of the EU Group recommendations at high level for modernization of the higher education regarding on improvement of the teaching and learning quality. The second section analyses the policy documents from Moldova and the extent to which the Changing Paradigm of Teaching by applying innovative methods of teaching is supported at governmental/institutional level. The third section contains the data and the results of a sociological analysis on the assessment and the attitude of the teaching staff and students on the application and effects of innovative teaching methods. The conclusions maintain the idea that a teaching method is considered traditional or modern based on the comparison between the intentional or unintentional produced consequences. The exchange of experience, vocation/pedagogical tact is important in Changing Paradigm of Teaching.

**Keywords:** methods; learning quality; European studies

Current practice shows that in assessment, accreditation and recognition of a university, the focus is on research, less on didactic process or students' performances. The universities are compelled to give a greater importance to research indicators than to concerns about the excellence in teaching. Teaching quality is rather a "penalty" in terms of reputation. The criteria that are focused on this aspect are few in number and credited indicators with significantly lower scores than research activities. The issue come to the attention of European Commission. UE group for higher education modernization at high-level published in June 2013 his first report on teaching and learning quality improvement in universities. The group, chaired by former President of Ireland, Mary Mc Aleese, found that many higher education institutions put too little focus on teaching in relation to research, even if both are main missions of higher education. "This must be rebalanced. Teaching role in defining academic merit needs an accent and a

---

<sup>1</sup>Associate Professor, PhD, Cahul State University "B.P. Hasdeu", Republic of Moldova, Address: 1 Piața Independenței, Cahul, Republic of Moldova, Tel.: 0299 22481, Fax: 0299 24752, Corresponding author: valycornea@yahoo.com.

stronger recognition, especially in terms of career". The group formulates 16 recommendations, noting that good quality teaching in higher education systems and vocational training is crucial to ensure that students are provided with a range of appropriate skills for their future personal and professional development<sup>1</sup>.

**The recommendations of commission**

1. sustainable, well-funded framework to support higher education institutions' efforts to improve the quality of teaching and learning
2. Strategies for continuously supporting and improving the quality of teaching and learning.
3. Encouragement, appreciation and consideration of student's feedback.
4. Certified pedagogical training for teaching staff in higher education institutions.
5. Entry, advancement and promotion of teaching staff based on the assessment of teaching competence, among other factors.
6. Providing rewards (scholarships or awards) to academics who make a significant contribution to improving the quality of teaching and learning, either through their practice either through research on teaching and learning.
7. Elaboration of educational programs through dialogue and partnerships between teaching staff, students, graduates and actors on the labor market.
8. Assessment of student performance based on clear learning objectives previously agreed.
9. Creation of counseling, mentoring, tutoring systems.
10. Promotion of teaching, learning and assessment, cross-curricular and interdisciplinary approaches.
11. Use of technology in teaching evaluation.
12. Application of internationalization strategies.
13. Promote and support application of the methodology of teaching and learning and innovative teaching approaches by the EU; mobility and exchanges of academic staff for teaching long term.
14. Creation of a European Academy of teaching and learning directed by stakeholders and inspired by good practices.
15. Researchers supported through the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Action and who intend to start a career in academics should be given the opportunity to acquire professional teaching qualification and teaching support activities in addition to their research activities.
16. Member States, in cooperation with the regions, are encouraged to give priority in the framework of partnership under the Structural Funds, initiatives to support the development of pedagogical skills, the development and implementation of relevant programs social needs and

---

<sup>1</sup>The report is available at: [http://ec.europa.eu/education/higher-education/doc/modernisation\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/education/higher-education/doc/modernisation_en.pdf).

---

labor market and strengthening some partnerships between higher education, industry and research.

What answers have Republic of Moldova regarding to these recommendations?

In Republic of Moldova, the education is predominantly public<sup>1</sup> and budget allocations are quite high. For example, during the 2013-2014, spending increased by 8.7% from 7088.0 million lei at 7.7023 billion, constituting 17.8% of total public spending of the national public budget. (*Sectoral Strategy of spending in education, 2015-2017*) Apparently large, allocations are insufficient for conducting an educational process at the recommended level of European Union officials. The major weight rests to salary costs. Average salary of university's teaching staff is less than average salary on economy. In 2014 the average monthly salary in education is 3 357.4 MDL (170 EUR) lower than the average salary on economy - 4 172.0 MDL (216 EUR)<sup>2</sup> In Moldova, higher education is the only subsystem that succeeded to finance themselves in a considerable proportion, attracting private resources (special funds), usually in the form of tuition fees. (Ciurea *et al.*, 2012)

The entry into force of the new Education Code (23/11/2014) bring changes in the regulation of new models the promotion of quality in education at all levels, the implementation of performance management in educational institutions based on meritocracy and decentralization. According to the provisions of the new Education Code higher education institutions have academic autonomy. The university autonomy encompasses both the domains of managing, structuring and functioning of the institution and organization, deployment and improvement teaching activity and scientific research. This regulation expresses the idea of academic freedom in the use of teaching methods, without imposing a particular model. Article 97 of the Code provides that learning, teaching and assessment methods are described in the National Qualifications Framework for each field of professional training. In Moldova field of European studies does not appear distinct, but combined with political science field, international relations or public administration. For these training areas teaching is carried out mainly through lectures, seminars, internships, noting that professional training involves the opening of renewals and responsiveness to changing both educational technologies and innovations (CNC, 2015). In these circumstances teaching remains the concern strictly individual of teaching staff consisting of attributes like empathy, insight, innovation, pedagogical and disciplinary research. Teaching staff have the right to choose and use the didactic technologies, textbooks and teaching materials approved by the Ministry of Education, as well as those alternatives which they consider appropriate to achieve the state educational standards.

---

<sup>1</sup>32 higher education institutions, including 19 state institutions and 13 non-state institutions.

<sup>2</sup><http://www.statistica.md/category.php?l=ro&idc=452&>.

Legal framework specifies that teaching staff professional development is mandatory throughout the professional activity and is regulated by the Government. Professional development is carried out in institutions of higher education and/or professional training institutions, other educational service providers, based on some accredited training programs by:

- a) professional training internships in education and research institutions or organizations accredited in the country and abroad;
- b) participation as partners in educational projects and/or national and international research projects;
- c) participation with communications and/or papers at conferences, seminars, symposiums, exhibitions. (Education Code, Article 133).

Financial support opportunities for professional development are limited. The Education Code states the right to annual monetary compensation for professional development within and under the conditions set by the Government, only for general education teaching staff. In higher education professional development remains “an individual assumed right.” Professional development activities with a focus on teaching and evaluation is limited mostly to individual efforts. Professional training internships and research in educational institutions or organizations accredited in the country and abroad, as required by Education Code, are practically impossible. Insufficient financial resources of universities and lack of clear regulatory are at least two factors that limit the realization of training/professional development stages. Opportunities to improve teaching and assessment are participations, as partners, to educational projects and/or to national and international research;

An example is *Innovating Teaching and Learning of European Studies Project (INOTLES)*.

INOTLES represents a joint academic effort of EU universities specialized in teaching European Studies (ES) and East European universities, following the aim of promoting curricular reform in the field of European Studies through innovative teaching approaches, curricular convergence and capacity building between the EU and Eastern partners.

Across the EHEA there is a vast range of pedagogic practice in ES, but this is largely generated in a bottom-up fashion, without systematic efforts to review and evaluate practice elsewhere. Thus ES risks missing out on the ever-better documented innovations in pedagogy that are being used to good effect in many locations and across many disciplines, driven both by technological change and inter-institutional cooperation. The project harnesses all of these trends to create a model of innovation that builds on local expertise to create adaptable resources that can be taken into a wide variety of MA contexts, while maintaining a significant level of quality assurance. In this project, exchange of best practice is fundamental

and is understood as working in both directions, not least since ES covers a wide range of substantive areas, in which no one partner has complete provision. Moreover, by creating dissemination resources that are open and developing a substantial community of practice and debate, it is foreseen that additional creative inputs will continue beyond the life of the project and be of use to HE bodies across Europe and beyond. The creation of ES will permit lasting support and the development of indigenous capacity, which in turn will enrich the EHEA.

The innovative methods promoted by INOTLES project are *Problem-Based Learning (PBL)*, *Simulation*, *E-learning/Blended learning*. Examples of good practice in the application of this method are presented by Maastricht University (Netherlands), Vrije University Brussels, (Belgium), University of Surrey, (United Kingdom).

*Problem-Based Learning (PBL)* is an active learning pedagogy, which 50 years after its development is still considered an alternative way of teaching and learning. PBL is based on the idea of small group collaborative learning with students being actively responsible for their own learning process and for the meaningful construction of knowledge by linking to existing knowledge. Problem Based Learning emphasizes active, problem-based and collaborative knowledge construction. Learning with PBL is learner-centered: the learner defines the exact content (and learns) already before even engaging with respective literature, and the learner is in charge of prescribing the exact learning process of the group.

Learning in such an environment increases motivation and the probability of learning by deep understanding in contrast to passive knowledge transfer. Yet, the incorrect implementation or superficial use of Problem-Based Learning also inherits certain challenges that can harm the positive impact of this alternative learning approach, and in the literature especially the importance of the role of the tutor as facilitator and the need for well-suited assignment texts as starting point are emphasized.

*Simulation games* are exercises that aim to recreate a real-world organization or process within the classroom. They are highly flexible in their operation and basic dimensions, but all are grounded in the idea that there are core processes that can be modeled, and that these processes are intrinsically chaotic. For participants, they offer an opportunity to experience the world in a different way, and gain insight into the perspectives of others. As such, they offer a valuable contrast to traditional teaching & learning approaches and are used either as a replacement or as an addition to these.

*E-learning* is defined as learning facilitated and supported through the use of information and communication technology, including web-based learning, computer-based learning, virtual classrooms.

*Blended learning* is a hybrid learning approach that combines traditional classroom or face-to-face learning with online learning: asynchronous (online discussion forums, emails, blogs, wikis) and synchronous (instant chats, video-conferences, webinars). Blended learning has several major advantages, such as flexibility in space and time for taking part in the learning process, the incorporation of individual student needs, as well as the opportunity of balancing the knowledge and skills transfer. Finding the right blend between different face-to-face and online learning methods and tools is the key to a successful course design and implementation. Blended learning approach requires a careful consideration of the technological advantages of e-learning instruments and their compatibility with the pedagogical strategies and learning objectives.

The methods presented build a new learning paradigm, namely a student-centered learning. Interactive methods are replacing traditional teaching methods, but the process occurs under a double pressure: on the one hand shall be positioned supporters, enthusiasts of the idea of change, on the other hand - forces which expresses a certain or even total resistance to change. Data from a survey among students supports this thesis. The questionnaire was constructed exclusively from statements the essence of innovative methods: cooperation and collaboration, taking responsibility, centered on the needs. Respondents were asked to express their attitude to these statements. The expressed intensity of attitudes ranges on this scale: fully positive, moderate positive, neutral, moderate negative, wholly negative. The first two positions on the scale indicate a higher degree of acceptance and willingness to actively involve students. It was applied to a sample of 47 students of the State University "B.P. Hasdeu" in Cahul.

### **Interactivity - Defining Aspect of Interactive Methods**

Interactive learning is a defining aspect of innovative methods. This is highly accredited by students. Most support cooperation and collaboration exercises, provided that they have the greatest effect in the work face to face, than outside the classroom. This suggests predisposition of students to devote time for training in a "narrow /limited space for learning". Collaboration and cooperation is appreciated only in this narrow space - in the classroom. Expand cooperation outside that space is not yet a constant in their process of education/professional training.

### **Consultation, Information, Support Measures**

Another observation relates to students as partner. The logic of student-centered learning, student, however unprepared would be, he must be associated with any acts of power, leadership, and academic authority. Both the consultation and direct involvement. Contrary to expectations, the indicator "Students should be involved

as equal and full members at all levels (ex. department, college, university etc.)” frequency of responses “right” is quite high - 39% of respondents. The fact may be associated with unwillingness or responsibility, and lack of confidence that the implication is for the sake of “form”. A similar situation is observed in the indicator “*Students should be involved in regular reviews of the quality of study programs.*”

### **Focusing on the Problems, Needs and Interests of Learners**

A key aspect of innovative methods is to take into consideration the needs and interests of students. Inevitably, students have different needs. For the purpose of student-centered education, centering on problems, needs, and interests “*allow students to study in a flexible manner, through part-time study, distance learning or e-learning systems. SCL approach shows that learning is not limited in time and space in the way it was traditional education. The different student learning needs can be met, because they may address learning materials in different ways. For example, some students work better with audiovisual materials, while others prefer to read. Moreover, by experimenting with several teaching methods, students are more academically challenging*” (Attard et al, 2012).

Centering on needs is an issue that must be valued with caution. By some critical comments, representatives of the academic community warns about the negative effects that may result. I subscribe to these allegations by completing some sociological considerations.

First I consider that we should replace the term *need* with *interest*. The existence and manifestation of a certain type of interest (either by materialistic, selfish or structural connotation) directs the behavior. (Zamfir, 1993). Moreover, the significance of the concept of “interest” is closely linked to necessity, desire and values. Therefore, priorities setting of development is both a deliberation and negotiation process, in which, the student is sustained to define his directions of actions. I will not deny and do not exclude that students show clearly outlined interest to guide their behavior, but certainly I cannot admit that in university study, their values system is well defined and directs them towards self-development behavior.

Second, the needs are relative. Rarely, these describe universal or fundamental situations. In most cases, they are delimited and dependent of beneficiaries' situation. In other words, needs are variable from one context to another. In Moldova “need to be good specialist” works almost like a myth. Young people increasingly invoke on the fact that “use of wangles system” is more important than knowledge. Obviously, that this de-motivates them. Data from the survey shows that more than 1/3 of the respondents share ideas focus on the needs of

students. Excessive focus on “needs” might not produce development, considering that “needs” are poorly correlated with a perspective vision.

### **Assessment Issue**

Student assessment is one of the most important elements of higher education. Assessment results have a profound effect on students' future careers. Therefore, it is important that the assessment should be professionally made every time and should be taken into account not only knowledge but also developed skills. It is probably the highest number of difficulties. Typically, this is because, assessment compares students between them, thus emphasizing competitiveness rather than improving on a personal level. Especially, this is accumulative assessment models for students, in which awarding points and mark is highlighted, while the granting of advice and learning functionary under-valued (Attard *et al.*, 2012). More than half of the students surveyed (73%) believe that the assessments must be constructed so that to encompass both testing knowledge and skills to use this knowledge, these are most suitable.

### **Conclusions**

European studies teaching is not a “scientific object” which must be explored only through the regulations. The regulations provide a general framework. Without exceeding the limits the provisions will be adapted to a reality under the constraints that occurs their formation and development. Because innovations in teaching to be translated into action and to lead to sustainable results is needed to 'innovate' teachers' attitudes too. The main features of an innovative teacher are cooperation, collaboration, trust in others, desire and willingness to innovate. Innovation in education involved in European studies teaching do not appear under regulations pressure, but is more about motivation and vocation of the teaching staff. Sharing information and looking for ideas (storytelling and scanning for ideas) is insufficient to produce innovative pedagogical action, if it is not supported by professional motivation of both teaching staff and students.

Innovative teaching methods provide training and skills development, but rather they will be selected based on a statement in action than on “student needs”. Student might do not realize that he would need something or which are the real needs.

Paradigm shift in teaching from traditional to modern should be done tactfully. A formula for this process is “ABC” - generic abbreviation which names three essential curricular organization: articulation, balancing and continuity (Dobridor, 2008, p. 220).



## References

Attard, A.; Di Iorio, E.; Geven, K. & Santa, R. (2012). Student centered learning: a guide for students, teaching staff and higher education institutions. *Publication prepared under the project "Time for a new model in education: Student Centered Learning, financed by European Commission support.*

Ciurea, C.; Berbeca, V.; Lipcean, S. & Gurin, M. (2012). Sistemul de învățământ superior din Republică Moldova în contextul Procesului de la Bologna: 2005 – 2011/The higher education system in Moldova in the context of the Bologna Process: 2005 - 2011. *Studiu elaborat la inițiativa și cu susținerea financiară a Fundației Soros-Moldova, în cadrul proiectului Studii aprofundate cu tematici europene/Study developed at the initiative and with financial support of the Soros Foundation, the project depth studies European issues.* Chisinau: IDIS Viitorul.

Negreț-Dobrișor, I. (2008). *Teoria generală a curriculumului educațional. O abordare diacronică și hermeneutică a întemeierii ca știință teleologică/The general theory of educational curriculum. A diachronic approach and teleological hermeneutics as a science foundation.* Iasi: Polirom.

Zamfir, C. & Vlăsceanu, L. (1993). *Dicționar de sociologie/ Dictionary of Sociology.* Bucharest: Babel.

\*\*\* (2015). *Cadrul Național al Calificărilor: Învățământul Superior/ National Qualifications Framework: Higher Education.* Coord. Handrabura L. Universitatea de Stat din Moldova, Chișinău.

\*\*\* Strategia sectorială de cheltuieli în domeniul educației/Sectoral spending Strategy in education domain, 2015-2017, <http://www.edu.md/file/Strategia>.

\*\*\* *Report to the European Commission on Improving the Quality of Teaching and Learning in Europe's Higher Education Institutions (2013)* High Level Group on the Modernization of Higher Education [http://ec.europa.eu/education/library/reports/modernisation\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/education/library/reports/modernisation_en.pdf).

\*\*\* (2014). Codul Educației al Republicii Moldova/Education Code of the Republic of Moldova. Published in the Official Monitor, no. 319-324, 24.10.2014.

<http://www.inotles.eu/>