

# **CURRICULAR CONTENTS APPROACHES - A COMPARATIVE STUDY ON STUDENTS' OPINION ON HIGH SCHOOL AND UNIVERSITY CONTENTS**

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**Abstract:** The main issue highlighted in this article is the importance of approaching the curricular contents in a modern perspective, respecting some characteristics, also mentioned by the new curricular theory. Using a 22 items inventory, on a sample of 165 students from The West University of Timișoara (first year of study, university year 2013-2014), our research goal was to establish the students' opinion about the degree in which the curricular contents taught to them respect the main characteristics of this modern approach. The interpretation of the research data points at the similarities and differences between the curricular contents used in the teaching process at high school level and those used at university level.

**Keywords:** curricular contents, modern approach, high school contents, university level contents.

## **Introduction**

What are the characteristics of the modern curricular contents? Who decides about the relevance and modernity in the process of selecting or implementing those contents in the educational process and how? The scientific literature has been offering a large wise of curricular models which provide some recipes for a modern curricula, at different levels and fields of education, for example:

H. Malkki and J.V. Paatero (2014) pointed at the fact that the curriculum is a key factor in defining any outcomes of the educational programme. The mentioned study demonstrated that offering students only a cluster of courses assured sufficient information for identifying existing strengths and good practices that can be built upon as key areas for a further improvement. So, not the quantity of contents is important, but the quality, which is reflected in setting up general guidelines for

optimisation and good practices in the field. In this respect, also N. Diekelmann and E. Smythe, (2004) discussed the issue of choosing a large amount of curricular contents or to present it in more efficient or effective ways. We observe that the mentioned authors insisted on the modalities of presenting in an efficient way the curricular contents in order to improve the learning process and propose some good practices for the students.

D. Zongyi, (2009) analysed the nature of the curriculum content in liberal studies and the curriculum making processes in Hong Kong secondary schools. The author presented the importance of knowing the underlying theory of content and not only the content per se, in order to disclose the educational potential of the content. Like in the previously mentioned study, in this work the relevance of an efficient theoretical construction of the curricular contents for the usage of its educational potential was also accentuated. Similarly, R.M. Diamond (1989) presented a systematic approach to the improvement of courses, syllabus and curricula in higher education. Focussing on the application of theory in practice, the author used a model for designing, implementing and evaluating courses and curricula. So, an efficient content in higher education is that which is permanently optimised and has an important pragmatic character.

S. Vartuli, J. Rohs, (2008) emphasised the importance of selecting curricular contents according to children's interests in order to develop their intrinsic motivation, at early childhood educational level. At university level, A.F. Roman and E. Balaş (2015) insisted on the fact that the teacher must take into account students' need of knowledge and professional competence in their academic endeavour. Using a curricular content related to the students's needs should be an imperative principle for each educational level, if we consider the students' needs more important than the scientific approach of the curricular contents. This will ensure both the motivation for assessment and the base for future competencies in the specific field.

L. H. McEneaney and J. W. Meyer (2000) detected the importance of the nature of the curricular contents and the changes made over the time. These are imperative because of the social changes which determined the update of the educational system and accentuated the need for correlation between the social requests and the updates of the contents. K. Egan (2003) highlighted that the society's rapid rate of changing determined the fact that content-based education cannot fulfil the demands of the society in the future. This state of art led to a shift from "students not to learn specific things so much as how to learn" (p.14). So, the new curricular contents should determine the achievement of some

learning tools as support for competences in a specific field of work or general competences of the students.

Analysing these studies, we could observe that the curricular contents' issues are oriented on different stages: starting from the selection process and following the implementation and the evaluation process (the practical relevance of its relating to society's needs) in the educational process. Each stage determines different characteristics of a modern curricular content. However, there is a unity between these approaches, continuing the idea of F. Bobbit (1918) who promoted the necessity of the empirical analysis of curriculum which was to prepare students for their future roles in society. This is a call for a dynamic content in the rapid social facets in order to replace the old and is a constant permanent need. According to this fact, it is necessary for higher education institutions to green and update their curricula. In the educational process, the utility of the curricular contents for real life situations and the holistic approach of contents (as an interaction between different fields' approaches) are more important than their quantity. So, students must have opportunities to learn with a deep understanding of subject matter that transforms factual information into usable knowledge (Pellegrino, J., W., 2006 p.4).

### **Methodology**

**The hypothesis** of our study was: the university students' opinion reveals that between the modern approaches of the curricular contents from high school to the contents of the university courses there is a significant difference regarding their characteristics.

**The goal** of the research was to establish first year students' opinion about the degree to which the curricular contents taught respect the main characteristics of the modern approach, both of the high school and university level.

**The methodology of the research** was settled up on a 22 items inventory, on a sample of 165 students from The West University of Timișoara (first year of study, university year 2013-2014). The inventory was developed starting from the modern characteristics of the educational content which are established in the theory of the curriculum. The results were interpreted using the Paired-samples t-test. This test was conducted to compare the modern characteristics of the curricular contents used in the teaching process at high school level and those used at university level.

**The objectives** of the research were:

O1. To identify the opinion on characteristics of the high school and university curricular contents of the first year university students.

O2. To establish the significant differences between the curricular contents used in the teaching process at high school level and at university level.

### **Results:**

The interpretation of the results presented below shows the obtained means for each level of study and the obtained results from The Paired Samples Test interpretation.

The highest means obtained on the curricular contents at university level were the following characteristics:

9. "Are relevant for the student's personal development" (3.83);

18. "Ensure the scientific character of all presented information or data" (3.80);

19. "Respect the logical relations between the contents of a discipline of study" (3.76);

22. "Are updated in relation with the requests of the society and the evolution of the domain" (3.71)

The highest means obtained on the curricular contents at high school level were the following characteristics:

19. "Respect the logical relations between the contents of a discipline of study" (3.62);

10. "Can be easily taught by teachers" (3.50);

17. "Ensure the continuity during the year of study" (3.54).

The lowest means obtained on the curricular contents at university level were the following characteristics:

14. "Have a volume which is well dimensioned and related to students' need" (3.26);

1. "Include ideas which have sufficient scientific legitimacy in any educational context" (3.36);

21. "Are continuously reconsidered, related to the students' needs" (3.37).

The lowest means obtained on the curricular contents at high school level were the following characteristics:

15. "Offer diversity in the problem approach" (3.08);

5. "Are applicable in the students' real life situations" (3.10);

21. "Are continuously reconsidered, related to the students' needs" (3.13).

*The Paired Samples Test interpretation* point at the differences between the curricular contents at university and high school level, the characteristics are seen below:

1. "Include ideas which have sufficient scientific legitimacy in any educational context"- there was not a significant difference in the scores for this characteristic of the curricular contents at university level (M=3.34, SD=1.07) and this characteristics of the curricular contents at high school level (M=3.31, SD=0.91) conditions;  $t(165)=0.35$ ,  $p = 0.72$ .

2. "Are easily related with other curricular contents"- there was a significant difference in the scores for this characteristic of the curricular contents at university level (M=3.63, SD=0.84) and this characteristics of the curricular contents at high school level (M=3.27, SD=0.90) conditions;  $t(165)=4.12$ ,  $p = 0.00$ .

3. "Are rich in explanatory force" - there was not a significant difference in the scores for this characteristic of the curricular contents at university level (M=3.42, SD=0.94) and this characteristics of the curricular contents at high school level (M=3.31, SD=0.91) conditions;  $t(165)=1.29$ ,  $p = 0.19$ .

4. "Determine the students to realise a critical analysis" - there was a significant difference in the scores for this characteristic of the curricular contents at university level (M=3.56, SD=0.97) and this characteristics of the curricular contents at high school level (M=3.28, SD=1.01) conditions;  $t(165)=3.12$ ,  $p = 0.02$ .

5. "Are applicable in the students' real life situations" - there was a significant difference in the scores for this characteristic of the curricular contents at university level (M=3.57, SD=0.94) and this characteristics of the curricular contents at high school level (M=3.10, SD=1.08) conditions;  $t(165)=5.1$ ,  $p = 0.00$ .

6."Are oriented towards action, problem solving and acquisition of new competences" - there was a significant difference in the scores for this characteristic of the curricular contents at university level (M=3.48, SD=1.08) and this characteristics of the curricular contents at high school level (M=3.32, SD=1.00) conditions;  $t(165)=1.73$ ,  $p = 0.08$ .

7. "Are presented in a modern approach"- there was a significant difference in the scores for this characteristic of the curricular contents at university level (M=3.67, SD=1.08) and this characteristics of the curricular contents at high school level (M=3.21, SD=1.00) conditions;  $t(165)=4.51$ ,  $p = 0.00$ .

8."Are interesting for students, arousing their curiosity" - there was a significant difference in the scores for this characteristic of the curricular contents at university level (M=3.58, SD=0.91) and this characteristics of the curricular contents at high school level (M=3.18, SD=0.99) conditions;  $t(165)=4.02$ ,  $p = 0.00$ .

9."Are relevant for the student's personal development" - there was a significant difference in the scores for this characteristic of the

curricular contents at university level (M=3.83, SD=0.91) and this characteristics of the curricular contents at high school level (M=3.49, SD=0.99) conditions;  $t(165)=3.54$ ,  $p = 0.00$ .

10. "Can be easily taught by teachers" - there was not a significant difference in the scores for this characteristic of the curricular contents at university level (M=3.61, SD=1.01) and this characteristic of the curricular contents at high school level (M=3.50, SD=1.05) conditions;  $t(165)=1.23$ ,  $p = 0.21$ .

11. "Sustain the attendance of the objectives in the student's educational activity" - there was not a significant difference in the scores for this characteristic of the curricular contents at university level (M=3.46, SD=0.94) and this characteristics of the curricular contents at high school level (M=3.38, SD=1.03) conditions;  $t(165)=0.88$ ,  $p = 0.37$ .

12. "Are adapted to the student's level, allowing the differentiated and individualised educational process" - there was not a significant difference in the scores for this characteristic of the curricular contents at university level (M=3.38, SD=0.99) and this characteristics of the curricular contents at high school level (M=3.34, SD=1.01) conditions;  $t(165)=0.44$ ,  $p = 0.66$ .

13. "Are contextually adapted" - there was a significant difference in the scores for this characteristic of the curricular contents at university level (M=3.46, SD=0.92) and this characteristics of the curricular contents at high school level (M=3.47, SD=1.01) conditions;  $t(165)=3.19$ ,  $p = 0.007$ .

14. "Have a volume which is well dimensioned and related to students' needs" - there was not a significant difference in the scores for this characteristic of the curricular contents at university level (M=3.26, SD=1.007) and this characteristics of the curricular contents at high school level (M=3.16, SD=1.006) conditions;  $t(165)=1.18$ ,  $p = 0.23$ .

15. "Offer diversity in the problem approach" - there was a significant difference in the scores for this characteristic of the curricular contents at university level (M=3.45, SD=0.92) and this characteristics of the curricular contents at high school level (M=3.08, SD=1.03) conditions;  $t(165)=3.85$ ,  $p = 0.00$ .

16. "Are characterised by the flexibility of the solving process" - there was a significant difference in the scores for this characteristic of the curricular contents at university level (M=3.42, SD=0.90) and this characteristics of the curricular contents at high school level (M=3.17, SD=0.91) conditions;  $t(165)=2.81$ ,  $p = 0.05$ .

17. "Ensure the continuity during the year of study" - there was not a significant difference in the scores for this characteristic of the curricular contents at university level (M=3.66, SD=1.00) and this

characteristics of the curricular contents at high school level ( $M=3.54$ ,  $SD=1.02$ ) conditions;  $t(165)=1.15$ ,  $p = 0.25$ .

18. “Ensure the scientific character of all presented information or data” - there was a significant difference in the scores for this characteristic of the curricular contents at university level ( $M=3.80$ ,  $SD=0.95$ ) and this characteristics of the curricular contents at high school level ( $M=3.57$ ,  $SD=0.97$ ) conditions;  $t(165)=2.25$ ,  $p = 0.02$ .

19. “Respect the logical relations between the contents of a discipline of study” - there was not a significant difference in the scores for this characteristic of the curricular contents at university level ( $M=3.76$ ,  $SD=0.88$ ) and this characteristics of the curricular contents at high school level ( $M=3.62$ ,  $SD=0.94$ ) conditions;  $t(165)=1.61$ ,  $p = 0.10$ .

20. “Offer the possibility to relate with other disciplines” - there was a significant difference in the scores for this characteristic of the curricular contents at university level ( $M=3.64$ ,  $SD=0.96$ ) and this characteristics of the curricular contents at high school level ( $M=3.38$ ,  $SD=0.99$ ) conditions;  $t(165)=2.74$ ,  $p = 0.007$ .

21. “Are continuously reconsidered, related to the students’ needs” - there was a significant difference in the scores for this characteristic of the curricular contents at university level ( $M=3.37$ ,  $SD=1.06$ ) and this characteristics of the curricular contents at high school level ( $M=3.13$ ,  $SD=1.06$ ) conditions;  $t(165)=2.87$ ,  $p = 0.005$ .

22. “Are updated in relation with the requests of the society and the evolution of the domain” - there was a significant difference in the scores for this characteristic of the curricular contents at university level ( $M=3.71$ ,  $SD=1.08$ ) and this characteristics of the curricular contents at high school level ( $M=3.17$ ,  $SD=1.19$ ) conditions;  $t(165)=5.65$ ,  $p = 0.00$ .

### **Conclusions:**

The curricular contents at university level assure the personal development of the students, the scientific and logical character of the domain or discipline, but are less centred on students’ needs, the scientific legitimacy of each educational context, dimensioning the volume of the content or its permanent reconsidering.

The characteristics of the curricular contents at high school level reveal that contents are much focused on the teaching process and their logic and continuity and less on diversity, applicability or students’ needs.

There was not a significant difference in the scores between high school and the university level for the characteristic of the curricular contents which are related to the teachers’ activity and their scientific determinations (8 items). In this category of responses only two items that focus on students’ activity and their educational needs were included.

For most students' responses a significant difference in the scores between high school and university level related to the characteristics of the curricular contents was observed. On each characteristic, the mean of the students' responses is higher at university level than at high school level.

The obtained means for each characteristics of the curricular content are situated on the positive side of the scale (up to 3), which demonstrates the following: at both educational levels teachers are preoccupied to offer their students contents related to the modern curricular theory requirements. In conclusion, the curricular contents approaches at university level are much modern than at high school level contents. This approach is centred obviously on students' needs and on the possibility to use these contents in other educational or social context in which the students are active participants.

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