NEW TRENDS IN CURRICULUM DESIGN PROCESS FOR HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract: *The aim of the paper is to present the actual tendencies in curriculum design for the university study programmes, taking in consideration the requirements of the labor market. These requirements consist in linking the qualification standards with the learning outcomes and with the competences, which will be assessed during the learning process, and at the end of the learning process, to the exam for licence, master dissertation or PhD. The paper presents few examples of curriculum design and curriculum lifecycle, proposed by European scholars.*

Keywords:*Qualification standards, learning outcomes, competences, curriculum design, curriculum lifecycle.*

The transformation of Higher Education systems and institutions in all countries in recent years has been characterised by an *expansion in the number of students and university graduates*, *the introduction of quality assurance policies* and procedures and *the adaptation of university curricula to meet the requirements of the new economyand present day labour markets*, mainly with regard to *the introduction of competences* as a fundamental learning objective in study programme.

The Bologna Declaration issued in 1999 can be considered the starting point for a paradigm change in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). But now, the European Qualification Framework (EQF) is the backbone of the paradigm change in Europe. It covers all aspects of qualification, including, but in no way limited to, the three cycles of the Bologna process, agreed upon in 2008. Its implementation has started all over Europe, it "*acts as a translation device to make national qualifications more readable across Europe, promoting workers' and learners' mobility between countries and facilitating their lifelong learning*" (European Commission, 2013), and more than that, promoting the new concept of *life wide learning* (a transversal learning not only a longitudinal one).

Nowadays, the European Qualification Framework set the basis to improve mobility and global work markets highlighting the role of University Education that have to adapt now to the new strategies. The formulation of an adequate strategy for competence-based teaching, the design of learning outcome based curricula and competence-based syllabus, are necessary elements of an up-to-date Higher Education.

„The formulation of the EQF level descriptors differs from the Bologna level descriptors developed specifically for higher education needs because, as a lifelong learning framework, the EQF also encompasses vocational education and training (VET) and work contexts, including at the highest levels." (EQF, 2013). In this conditions Higher Education Institutions (HEI) all over Europe need to adapt to these new frameworks.

Each HEI needs to prepare sets of competences, consistent with the learning outcomes, for each degree programme and ultimately for each course, which will be used to demonstrate that students have reached the level of competence required for the respective level. These competences can and should build upon each other, hence, each competence needs to be defined in various levels. For example, the competence to use the IT requires different levels of expertise to full the requirements for Bachelor, Master or PhD cycles. These requirements will be additionally different for diverse fields of study.

But those requirements offer, at national level, the quality assurance of the educational system, and at international level, the learning outcomes can increase transparency, mobility and comparability. Learning Outcomes are acknowledged as one the basic building blocks of European higher education reform. They exemplify a particular methodological approach for the expression and description of the curriculum (modules, units and qualifications) and level, cycle and qualifications descriptors associated with the „new style" Bologna qualifications frameworks. Now, countries can reference the level of their own national qualifications to the eight common reference levels (6 for Bachelor, 7 for Master and 8 for PhD cycles). Using this approach, the level of knowledge, skills and competences of several thousand different educational qualifications become comparable.

The need for the formulation of learning outcomes is combined with the commitment of the EQF (European Qualifications Framework) to outline design guides with learning outcomes in order to promote the recognition of paths and therefore the mobility of job profiles and skills. A learning outcome is a student-centred statement of what you want your students to know, understand or be able to do as a result of a completed process of learning. Learning outcomes are generally seen to positively contribute to teaching, learning and assessment at institutional level. Thus, they seek to describe the

student's learning progress in terms of the knowledge acquired, the comprehension of that knowledge, the capacity to apply it, and the capacity to analyse, synthesise and evaluate.

Most theorists and practitioners agree that, generally, learning outcomes should be:

a. summaries of essential areas of learning that result from a course of study;
b. written in the future tense, often expressed as „you will be able to";
c. explicit and clearly expressed;
d. limited in number;
e. expressed with a verb indicating the relation to of the outcome to „domains (or types) of learning";
f. written with a level of learning/learner in mind.

There are many approaches *to making learning outcomes visible*. One of them is *to define competences* the students need to *acquire*, which *at the beginning of a course are used as learning aims, during the course will be used as learning guidelines and after successful completion of the course can be considered learning outcomes*. No matter how learning outcomes are exactly defined, *the shift from knowledge-based to competence-based teaching* is always a part of it. Of course, *defining learning outcomes* and respective *learning activities* which lead to their acquisition make it also much easier *to estimate the needed study time* and *to assess the amount of credits to be awarded*. In this way, competence-based teaching connects also to the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS).

The concept of competence has always been one of the most controversial issues during the process of restructuring the university studies within the EHEA. It can be easily argued that competence is an integrated set of knowledge, skills and attitudes:

- Knowledge has to do with *knowing*. For example, you have knowledge of a particular culture, the operation of a device, the steps to solve a problem, etc.
- Skills have to do with *can*. It involves actions (mental or physical). For example, you replace a tire, give a presentation, operate a computer, etc.
- Attitudes have to do with *wanting*. Examples are showing initiative, empathy, motivation, etc.

Someone is indeed competent if he or she can use certain knowledge, skills and attitudes in a particular context and act appropriately.

Both in the professional world and in the world of education there is a trend towards competency-based thinking. Competency based thinking is part of a number of notable social changes. Knowledge is and remains a determining factor in the global competition game. But only possessing knowledge is not sufficient. Especially „managing" knowledge is the ultimate challenge. Competences needed to participate in the labour market and in this modern

society must be developed. Therefore, education cannot be done without thinking and acting in terms of competences but related with European Qualification Framework and National Qualification Framework. New perspectives on curriculum design impose themselves.

Curriculum design of the university study programmes and its lifecycle has passed through different approaches and most relevant are pointed out below:

➢ John Biggs (1996, 2003) wrote about curriculum coherence, by means of constructive alignment: *achieving congruence between the intended learning outcomes, the teaching and learning activities and the assessment*.

➢ Jenniffer Moon (2001) sees *curriculum development as a more iterative process, involving "checking and improving the coherency" of a course, promoting good practice*. Structuring factors here might include international, national, institutional or professional body requirements.

➢ Jenkins (2009) uses the analogy of a ouija board when considering curriculum design, showing different influencing "forces".
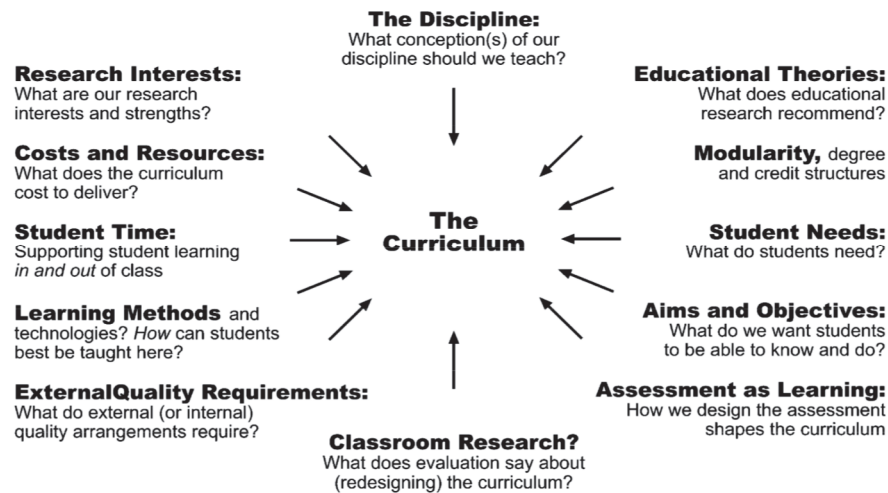

Scheme 1. Curriculum design through the analogy of an Ouija board
(Jenkins, 2009:163)

➢ JISC (2009) present a curriculum lifecycle for integrating technology as an enabling factor.
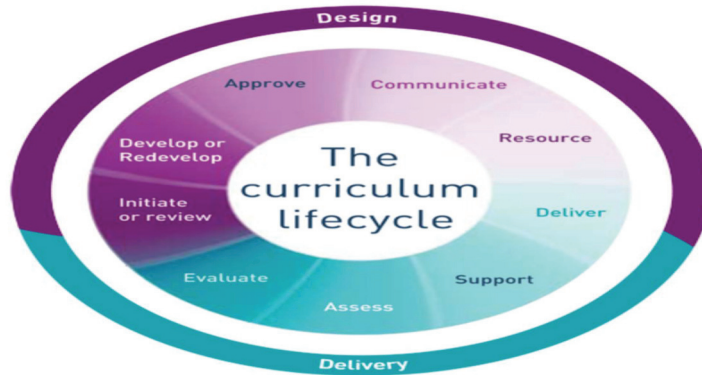
Scheme 2. The Curriculum Lifecycle (JISC, 2009)

➢ The Duckling team (2009) at the University of Leicester, developed the curriculum lifecycle shown below, including action research and regular feedback from stakeholders.
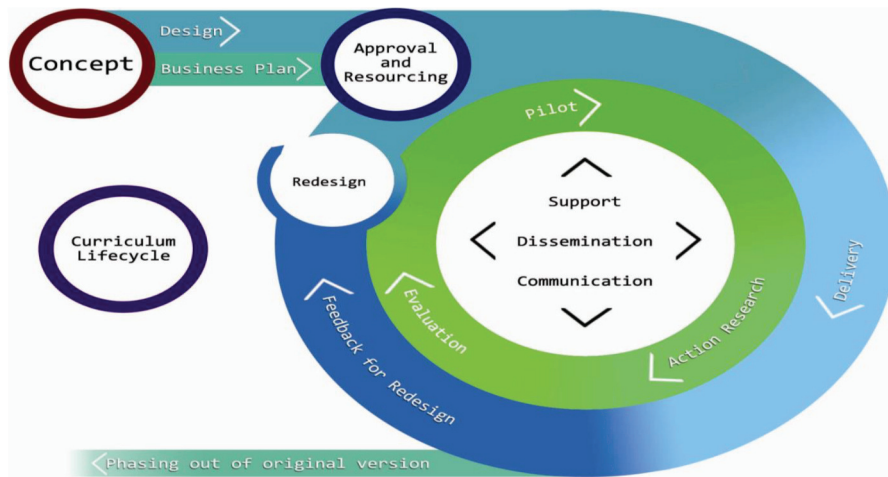
Scheme 3. Curriculum Lifecycle (The Duckling team, University of Leicester, 2009)

All these approaches are to be taken into account in the current situation of Higher Education who wants internationalization, to become much closer and flexible to the labour market demands, more effective and efficient.

It is therefore not surprising that in addition to the structural reforms (Ba, Ma, PhD, ECTS, Diploma Supplement) that are at the core of the Bologna reforms, two objectives have been gaining importance and may now have come to the top of the Bologna agenda:

- the need *to promote the competitiveness and attractivenessof European universities* in the world, and

• the need *to draw up a European framework of reference for qualifications*, i.e. an instrument fostering the compatibility and cross-recognition of qualifications, whether for the purpose of further studies/training or access to the labour market.

It is interesting to point out that these two aspects have also become core concerns in recent initiatives taken within the EU's Lisbon Strategy. The Lisbon Strategy wants to create "more and better jobs" and at the same time to foster social integration and citizenship. These goals are strongly related to the emergence of a real European labour market, which is bound to shape a good deal of the university offering and functioning in the years ahead.

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