

## The Curriculum Reform in Universities– European University of Tirana Model

Dr. Tomi Treska

European University of Tirana

Email: [tomi.treska@uet.edu.al](mailto:tomi.treska@uet.edu.al)

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**Abstract** *The curriculum reform constitutes one of the main conditions to ensure the quality in the Education system. The focus of this paper is to identify the factors, components and their relationships, which are the object of curriculum reform in the higher education system. This study is conducted in cooperation with the researchers of the European University of Tirana. This research has found a successful implementation of the curricula in this university. A structural element of this new model is the term/form “typology”. So the organization of the subjects is realised not only respecting their classification in categories but also in the typology. The product of the reform is the creation of the three typologies, which are known in EUT as the subject group of Typology 1, the subject group of Typology 2 and the subject group of Typology 3. This is reflected in the regulatory documentation of the European University of Tirana along with the clear definition of the criteria, modalities for the organization manner of the lecture’s hour in the classroom, together with the different training sessions with all academic personnel, guarantee the success of this new initiative. This reformation has had an effect in the review of all study programs, syllabuses and all documents related to those. This study brings logical and qualitative arguments on the productivity of this model. This model is a new one for all Albanian universities. From this point of view, this is not only an experience which should be shared among the universities in Albania, but also a model to be followed from them.*

**Keywords:** *reform of universities, curricula, typology, category, method, methodology.*

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The curriculum reform with the aim of its updating and modernization constitutes one of the main conditions to ensure the quality in the Education system. Among 10 priorities planned by Bologna Process, the fifth one addresses exactly to the “curriculum reform”.

The focus of this paper is to identify the factors, components and their relationships, which are the object of curriculum reform in the higher education system. The study introduces a theoretical presentation of the curriculum conceptualization and the issues which guide its drafting and reforming process, and also an applicable model of this conceptualization in actual conditions of the European University of Tirana—EUT.

According to Ulrich Teichler, the functions of higher education in present days are:

- To convey the meaning of academic theories, methods and knowledge;
- To guarantee the cultural growth and student’s personality development;
- To prepare students for future jobs by equipping them with “tools” and “rules” of the conventional professional job;
- To prepare students to be critical of professional job’s “rules” and “tools”, by being skeptical and critical, by coping With vague tasks of the job and by attempting to be innovative (Teichler 2008)

Nevertheless, today in the world there is still a lack of distinction between “demand”, which derives from Labour Market, and “requirements” which come as criteria and standards of Higher Education Institutions. This vagueness is expressed in some aspects, i.e. (Teichler 2008):

- The employers’ point of view with regard to concrete abilities and “extra-functional” abilities, are mainly short-term and unilateral.
- “Credentials”, in the sense of credibility/reputation of the institution etc.
- Financial income margin in various professions is imposed mainly by socio-political factors (not by academic ability), but also by other factors which are not always obvious.
- Labour Market for the graduates changes rapidly.
- International standards and models are very often controversial, or they are not fully harmonized with local/national requirements. This tendency de-values the latter.

*Although the international factor is increasing its influence on national context through globalizing processes, still, the*

"majority of the universities operate mainly within their national span and context, and they are part of their country's education system". (Maringe, F. and Fosket, N (eds). (2010)

- It occurs that the graduates do not apprehend the role and the benefit of abstract general academic knowledge when they encounter the concrete reality of the Labour Market and its demands. It is noticed what is considered as "*The paradox of qualification*", which means that the graduates are required to be *over-* and at the same time *under-educated*.
- Higher education tends to prepare the students to be rational, have critical thinking, and to surmount difficulties they may encounter when employed, difficulties which are not quite palpable even to academic staff, and furthermore is it to students. Higher education also prepares the students to be innovative, something which is seldom required by employers.
- Often on students, the academic and labor reality create scenarios of student' own future, which mismatch with each other.

Actually in world-wide debates there are determined two dilemmas (an ambivalence) on the attitude toward the Higher Education and Labour Market. On one hand the expansions of higher education seems to bring benefits on the country's development, but on the other hand this "expansions" decreases the possibilities for the graduate to get employed.

With the significance of functional ambivalence, on one side, it is noticed the need for a more direct connection between professional qualification and the curriculum of the study programmes, or so called "employability", and on the other side it is worrying to notice a tendency to consider less the academic learning, comprehensive education, profits beyond and despite the labor market, dependency on employer etc. (Teichler 2008)

Recent international studies have show that changes i curriculum have happened as much for academic reasons as for economic ones, or even because of an increase of student's demands. Nevertheless in these studies it is concluded tha the academic personnel has not only been positive toward changes in curriculum, but also considers them successful. (Gruba at el, 2004) Another group of scholars share the opinion that the reformation of curriculums and their design is a process which is affected as much by the inner philosophy of the universities, their objective and vision as by government structures, legal framework, and by local or regional cultures, which are considered to be of the same importance in the academic planning process and in the academic make-up of the study programmes. (Lattuca and Stark 2009)

Since mid-80' education reforms in literature often have been focused on the ambiguous term "curriculum". In fact this word has been modified continuously.

#### *What is an "University curriculum"?*

Thinking in this direction is processed by academics, administrators, students and also by other scholars of Higher Education. This has brought a kind of sophistication in defining the curriculum. However many people in their efforts to come up with a definition for the curriculum include at least one of the following elements:

- The objective or the mission of an university, or a collective utterance of what is considered to be important for the students to study;
- A set of experiences that some authorities believe that the students must have;
- A set of courses which are offered to students;
- Courses that the students chose among those offered;
- The content of a particular discipline;
- Time and credits in which an university ensures the education; (Lattuca and Stark 2009)

Some researchers think that the most usual form of changing the curricula concerns their structure, like in the case of changing the order of subjects in a study programme, the compilation of university calendars, or change of the number of necessary credits to obtain a diploma.

Regardless of the debates concerning the university curricular reform and the focus mostly on the structural dimension by most of the researchers, it seems that lawmakers, policy makers and the public speak of "curricula improvement", but in fact they have something more than simply the structural changes in their minds. For them, the changes in the curricula must contain essential changes with the process and the contents of students' learning/studying and the universities need to be capable of reflecting this improvement in the process and contents of learning/studying.

Currently the requirements for higher responsibility and quality demand a rather consensual understanding of what is understood as “curriculum” and “curricular reform”. Likewise, if the curriculum is generally understood as “academic plan”, the process, if its intensive planning, can be considered as “curriculum development”. The practical conceptualisation of the curriculum as a plan helps us identify its structure, or the points/rubrics it consists of, which could individually become object to continuous revision and change. Lattuca and Stark recommend 8 elements a curriculum consists of: (Lattuca and Stark 2009)

- Purpose – programme objectives
- Content – programme themes
- Sequence – Contents organisation extended in time
- Students – characteristics, qualities and skills of the students to attend this programme
- Resources – literature, academics and technological materials
- Processes – conducting classes and teaching activities
- Evaluation – assessment of students’ and teacher’s results
- Adjustment/revision – in the sense of improving not only the plan but the planning process as well

In general, the purpose of education is to make the world a better place for everyone. The students must be taught to understand that they play and have to play a (more) important role in this respect. Nevertheless, curricula remain the most essential factor, and it needs to be built in a way to teach the students to adapt themselves to a changing society and intervene wherever it is possible. In this sense the curricula must be considered as a changing academic plan.

The change with the curricula needs to reflect the contemporary social developments. E.g. in the 1970-s the American universities responded to the curricula changes concerning women rights as well as other civil rights. These movements started out of the academic field, but when the students and the academic staffs joined these causes, this led to curricula changes. Presently the study programmes on women and ethnic studies are part of many universities, some of which are genuine study programmes.

A new study programme or the revision of an existing programme may require the involvement into this process of many higher education institution sectors, like marketing research, business plans (short-term, mid-term, and long-term), processes of an academic discussion, like the ones concerning discussions within group-subject/s, within the department, in the faculty council, etc., review of existing regulatory legal frame, as well as formal processes of reviewing and approving that can involve the Academic Senate, or Working Boards, until the programme is being promoted with the students through guides, books, advertisements, brochures, etc.

The factors that influence changes with the higher education curricula are multiple. A group of well-known experts in the field of university curricula have made serious attempts at identifying these factors. According to them the most important factors are:

- Influential individuals, or well-known personalities in the university field, or a certain group of disciplines;
- Financial influences or requirements, including the cases when the financial situation does not allow such a thing, as well as cases when they are nor favourable;
- The quality, capacity and teaching loads of the academic staff as well as the assisting and administrative staff;
- Job market approaches or influences;
- Requirements of present or future students;
- Students’ skills, level and limitations of the students due the transition from one cycle to another.
- Pedagogical argumentation and teaching methodology;
- University requirements, or existing legal obligations;
- Needs for professional and institutional accreditation, or the structure, criteria and standards set by the university for the study programmes and programmes of subjects it is constituted of;
- The academic “Moda”/trend, or the desire/need/ambition to be in step with other home or foreign institutions.

They are joined by some other researchers according to whom curricula reformation and planning are not only influenced by the inner universities’ philosophy, or their purposes and visions, but also the governmental structures and the culture of the respective countries. (Lattuca and Stark 2009)

The European University of Tirana – EUT has conceptualised the curricula revision and reformation from a broader perspective than the abovementioned factors. This process was part of the reformation and management of the entire

University.

It must be accepted that management concept is relatively new to the universities (not only in Albania -TT) and quite often it has been treated with doubt (Hatakenaka, S. and Thompson, Q. 2006). Several times this concept is connected with a broadly used concept in the literature of higher education which is related to entrepreneurial university, a concept attached to the literature during the 80' (Williams, G. and Kitaev, I. 2005). while in Albania it was considered as a possible model to be implemented only in years 2000. Nevertheless, there is not an open debate about this concept yet. The public debate is mostly on problems faced by the public universities, such as their autonomy, requests for more spaces, better infrastructure, logistics, or issues concerning their management and financing. But there is little comment made concerning the private universities' inner structure, the model of their management, or the way these universities are adapting themselves in the new context of higher education in Albania.

The current EUT management has brought important changes with the leadership, management and its structure. At the bases of these changes was placed the approach of the corporation's management, "leadership at all levels", which adapted to the academic context, allowed EUT to identify the necessary changes to be made. What factors influenced on EUT to undertake this project? To Williams and Kitaev the five factors that influence university changes are: ideology, expansion, "knowledge society", globalisation and financial scrutiny (Williams, G. and Kitaev, I. 2005) These factors involved UET-in in its inner transformation and the new management model. The educational system in Albania is getting more and more competitive. Like in many eastern European countries, the higher education institutions, the public and private universities in Albania find themselves competing with one another, mostly for students. The competition among private universities is fierce and according to Williams and Kitaev some of them need to strengthen their governance and make a more "aggressive" marketing of the study programmes they provide (Williams, G. and Kitaev, I. 2005)

The new model was conceptualized as a decentralized model which empowers the employees and stimulates competition among them in order to increase the quality of the university and at the same time to generate efficiency and (efficacy). However, we point out that there are not "good" or "bad" management models but there are different management ways which vary from one context to another.

The new management model of EUT is still based on the philosophy that the teaching and scientific research are the two main pillars of the activity of our university. In this point of view, it was necessary to make a more specific and clear definition of each of the pillars and of their relation as well. Certainly, there were a lot of debates and discussion in this regard. The obtained conclusion was sanctioned in clearly defying the vision, the mission and the strategic objectives to guide its work.

The current vision of EUT is: To be a leading university in the development of knowledge of the Albanian society, a centre of excellence for the academic training of our students, a centre of expertise specialized in the social-political, economic and legal studies in the country, influencing our region and beyond, as well as a research centre of excellence in the specific domains of our expertise.

The mission: to give students a quality education that conveys the results of a valid scientific research, to serve the knowledge of the Albanian society through teaching, creativity, the use of best scientific achievements and through the labour market partnerships and the international ones.

The EUT governing body of delegates its own authority and responsibility toward the institutional management through distributed leadership and by building a clear relationship of responsibility and accountability.

Levels of hierarchy are created for: the strategy formulation, distributed leadership (top-down perspective), exercise of the leadership (bottom -up) and preservation of the quality management principles (top-down and parallel (across).

The core of this mechanism consists of the departments, which are defined as organized units of experts who share their dedication to a special methodological and substantive approach on the knowledge and who are guided by a system of common standards and criteria for quality. The departments manage: the teaching and learning activity, scientific research activity and human resources.

An assessment of the perception of the new model and its results on EUT is undertaken through two surveys with the lecturers and the students. The EUT professoriate of assessed the new management model with the average grade of 8.7, whereas the students with the average grade of 8.5. However, both surveys produced valid inputs to make possible the necessary improvements of this project as well as the quality standards of EUT.

It is believed that the successful implementation of this project which affects the leadership, the management, structure and certainly the university curricula, will increase its quality by improving the competition in the complex market of the higher education in Albania.

Specifically with regard to the curricula, the EUT novelty consists of the increase of the compatibility between

diplomas and profession, a challenge to the entire higher educational system in Albania.

A structural element of the new model is the term/form/way "typology". The argumentation on the typology deepens the analysis and the organization of the subjects (the classes) not only respecting their categorization as required by the current legal frame, but also on typology basis.

Product of the curricula reformation is the creation of three typologies which are already known at EUT as 1) the subject group of Typology 1, 2) the subject group of Typology 2 and 3) the subject group of Typology 3.

This is reflected in the regulatory documentation of the European University of Tirana along with the clear definition of the criteria, modalities for the organization manner of the lecture's hour in the classroom, together with the different training sessions with all academic personnel, guarantee the success of this new initiative.

This reformation has had its impact on the review of each studying program, each subject program, on the definition of the form of the lectures prepared and given to the auditor, in the pedagogical method that each lecturer should apply in accordance with the typology, bibliography and literature made available to the students, and in the way of controlling students knowledge.

This reformation is a novelty with all Albanian universities. From this point of view, this is not only an experience which should be shared among Albanian universities, but also a model to be followed by them.

In fact, what are these typologies and under which criterion is made the division of subjects based on typology?

According to the regulation of the institution, based on the method of organizing courses and the ways of controlling student's knowledge:

- Typology 1 includes general theoretical subjects. These subjects are organized in lectures and colloquies and are conducted by senior lecturers holding academic degrees.
- Typology 2 includes professional education subjects. These subjects are organized in an interactive way, consisting of lectures, seminars and laboratory classes, conducted by lecturers holding at least the doctor degree and specialized in the respective field.
- Typology 3 includes practical/applicative subjects. These subjects consist of seminars and laboratory classes and are held by assistant lecturers or PhD-s.

The classes are held on lectures, colloquies, lecture/seminars or group seminar/laboratory basis. The subjects of Typology 1 are organized in lecture hours for large groups of 200-250 students, (3 classes/per week) and colloquies in groups of 60 students (3 colloquies x 3 classes per trimester). The subjects of Typology 2 are organized in lecture/seminars in groups of 50-60 students (3 classes/per week). The subjects of Typology 3 are organized in lecture/seminars or laboratory classes, (3 or 4 classes / per week). The groups shall not exceed 30 students.

The evaluation/assessment of the academic preparation of the student relies on the principle of continuous control. The final grade is the resultant of the combination of the following elements:

- Typology 1 subjects: Final exam (70% of 3 colloquies x 10% = 30%)
- Typology 2 subjects: Final exam (40%) Midterm Exam (30%), Assignments 20% and level of participation in seminars 10%
- Typology 3 subjects: 5 practical assignments x 20% = 100%

The classes consist of lectures, seminars, lecture/seminar, colloquies, laboratory practice, practical assignment, assignments, midterm exams, final exams, professional practice and (thesis preparation).

It remains a priority for the European University of Tirana the draft, the review and the reformulation of the curricula at all study levels. The organization of this process is initiated from the top level and should be conducted from bottom to up levels/parallel level. The process involves all the interested actors and factors (students, lecturers, group-subjects, departments and The Labour Market Boards). The final decision is entitled to the highest levels of the organigramme of the university: to the Council of Faculty, and definitely to the Academic Senate of the University.

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