

Measuring what and how to teach. Structuring curriculum revision in modern languages

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Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to present a project aimed at training a multi-professional at a Greek higher education institution: The paper goes into the process of revising the curriculum that is applied to train language services provider for the public and the private sector.

In recent years a number of initiatives at national and EU level have been established to shape the conditions for innovation in curriculum development. The project of revising the undergraduate curriculum of the Department of Applied Foreign Languages in Management and Commerce at the Epirus Institute of Technology in Greece is part of the second stage of an initiative called Operational Programme for Education and Initial Vocational Training II. The overall goal of the project is targeted at introducing constant processes for assessing, updating and revising programme curricula in Greek higher education in accordance with the ever changing practice and developments in society and economy. The paper provides insight into how the curriculum revision project was facilitated and goes into the expected repercussion on the services provided.

Keywords: curriculum revision, structure of project, languages, management.

1. Introduction

When we hear from someone that he/she studies languages our mind is drawn in a reflective way to the study of linguistics, literature, teaching of a second language, translation and interpreting, etc. Only few would think about the study of linguistic skills combined with the study of business and/or management issues.

The globalized society we live in allows persons, goods and services to move around the globe. The more people and goods or services are on the move, the more intercultural contact situations in business and management settings will arise. These situations reveal the width and the breadth of the required communicational incongruences that call for specialized professionals trained and motivated to facilitate effective communication over linguistic and cultural borders. The demand for linguistic and cultural services is expected to exceed the more traditional translation and interpreting services (Newmark, 2003 / Pym, 2002); every transaction put forward in this environment constitutes an intercultural experience, which – needless to say – is handled more effectively by a specialist able to assess what kind of linguistic and/or extralinguistic means have to be used in the particular situation so that the goal is achieved.

The purpose of my paper is to provide insight into the structure of the programme curriculum revision project conducted at the Department of Applied

Foreign Languages in Management and Commerce at the Epirus Institute of Technology in Greece. The paper will also dwell upon the methodological tools used to acquire the necessary data functioning as the caterpillars that will support the effective redesign of the curriculum; it will go into how the acquired data was turned into the requirements the new programme curriculum had to meet and, furthermore, it will discuss the expected repercussion of the entire project on the services offered by the department.

2. The Department of Applied Foreign Languages in Management and Commerce and the Operational Programme for Education and Initial Vocational Training II

At the outset I will briefly present the Department of Applied Foreign Languages in Management and Commerce at the Epirus Institute of Technology and the programme curriculum revision projects which have been put forward within the framework of the Operational Programme for Education and Initial Vocational Training II (O.P. Education II).

2a. The Department of Applied Foreign Languages in Management and Commerce

The Department offers students the chance to be educated and trained in a domain which is very dynamic in other countries and unique to Higher Education in Greece: the combined study of applied foreign language skills and business/management issues. The Department admitted students initially in the academic year 1999-2000. In March 2003 the first students performed their obligatory industry placement training with companies all over Greece and abroad. The first degrees were conferred in October 2003. Today over 800 students are enrolled.

Dealing with language tasks, the contact with the sciences of language, the acquaintance with cultural features of foreign peoples and the combined treatment of business and management issues are an attractive object to study. Students acquire a multifaceted training with a wide range of applications; during their studies they acquire the skills to communicate interculturally in at least two languages, they are introduced to second language teaching methodology, foster intercultural competency and develop business awareness. The goal of the programme curriculum is to shape graduates able to facilitate communication by applying the linguistic skills needed in the expanding and demanding world of business and management and who are aware of their role as the critical link between cultures, between various economic systems, between diverging business mentalities, between provider and providee.

2b. Revising curricula and the Operational Programme for Education and Initial Vocational Training II (O.P. Education II)

Despite progress in understanding the way in which people gain knowledge and foster their professional skills as well as the design of innovative learning environments, teaching practice in higher education has remained mostly unaffected. I think it is safe to say that instructors at tertiary level have traditionally not been encouraged to draw upon theoretical developments as a means of improving curriculum design and teaching practice. This changed recently, when a number of initiatives at national and EU level were launched, whose purpose it is to shape the conditions for causing innovation in these

activities; teaching and learning is increasingly becoming recognised as a more valid area of enquiry for academics across all disciplines, rather than as the unique preserve of specialists (Riding, Ph. *et al.*, 1995: 3).

Generally, the Operational Programme for Education and Initial Vocational Training (O.P. Education II) is designed to aid academic institutions in Greece in meeting the challenges arising internationally due to the constant socio-economic changes and the inclining development of innovative technologies. O.P. "Education" is one of the Third Community Support Framework's 24 Operational Programmes (2000-2006) in Greece, and is co-financed by the European Social Fund, the European Regional Development Fund and national resourcesⁱⁱⁱ.

The project of revising the undergraduate curriculum of the Department of Applied Foreign Languages in Management and Commerce is part of the second stage of the O.P. Education II; aimed at introducing constant processes for assessing, updating and revising of curricula into Greek higher education in accordance with the ever changing practice and developments in society and economy. Academics from all disciplines were encouraged to engage in curriculum development and to work the way they deliver.

In the first phase of the initiative O.P. Education I - the pilot stage for our programme curriculum revision and within the frame of which - the introduction and cultivation in academe of a mentality of constant adaptation of higher education curricula was targeted; this procedure initiated and sustained the dynamic interchange of Greek tertiary education with reality outside the ivory tower. As far as these kind of projects generally are concerned, the target of a curriculum revision is to equip the student with the qualifications and skills that will allow him/her to face a complex and constantly changing academic, professional, social, cultural and technological reality^{iv}. The basic survival kit required for coping in the knowledge society and the increased competitiveness on the labour market gives birth to new demands as far as the quality of the teaching/learning process are concerned. This process of adapting programme curricula by taking into consideration data from outside academe inevitably links higher education even more to the labour market.

3. The revision project: Structure and synergy

The deeper one goes into instructional sequences of any level the more specific becomes, that what students will have to know and should be able to do as a result of engaging in the learning process. The performance outcome in terms of knowledge and skills acquired during the course of studies has been defined as the intended learning outcomes (Jackson *et al.*, 2003: 1).

The intended learning outcomes approach formed the basis for the design of the whole project dealing with the curriculum revision in the Department of Applied Foreign Languages in Management and Commerce. Every instructional sequence on every level of the teaching/learning process must have clearly set out student performance goals, which result in the intended learning outcomes of the programme curriculum.

Furthermore, what one cannot afford to ignore when attempting to revise a programme curriculum are the subsequent - needless to say - intertwined factors (Jackson *et al.* 2003: 2):

a. learner needs (what do learners know, when they engage with their studies and what will they need on the way toward achieving the intended learning outcomes),

b. aims of the instructional sequences and the overall course of studies in terms of labour market expectations,

c. learning outcomes in terms of the knowledge and skills to be acquired,

d. available resources,

e. learning and teaching strategies (how the instructor delivers and how students react) and

f. assessment criteria to be met by the revised programme curriculum.

The above features have been taken into account when the project was structured:

The whole approach to the revision process this paper is about, reduced to its simplest form, can be defined by a frame consisting of the following:

a. the intended learning outcomes, both of the instructional sequences and of the overall curriculum.

At the highest level, a programme curriculum for a Technological Educational Institute in Greece has to aim at the following aspirational objectives set out in Act 2916/2001 titled Structure of Higher Education:

To train the student both theoretically and practically so that he/she

is able to act as a connecting link between technical know-how and practical application,

will transfer, use and promote the application of state-of the-art scientific know-how in their professional environment.

This objectives set out by the legislator have to be the highest criteria and set the frame for designing or revising a programme curriculum. The core of the intended learning outcomes encompass the knowledge, skills and behaviours a graduate of the particular programme can apply in given settings, that what is called the student profile. A prerequisite for the above is the constant updating of instruction both in terms of contents and in terms of teaching methodology. The intended learning outcomes have of course to be in line with the objectives of the programme under revision and the relationship between the intended learning outcomes and student profile cannot be anything else than a linear one.

The process and resources to enable the outcomes to be achieved and demonstrated (curriculum, teaching, learning methods and materials, assessment, support and guidance methods).

Since education focuses, but with adequate electivity, on the enhancement of student's special interests by facilitating the broadening and deepening of knowledge pools, skills, attitudes and behaviours required in the students potential work environment, the teaching settings should promote these goals through an increased drive towards individualized or small group learning experiences.

The traditional programme curriculum focused on the teacher rather than the student – an attitude ignoring student individuality. However, in recent years

there has been a shift taking place, moving the emphasis from teaching to learning and a more student-centred curriculum. This change has impacted on the curriculum design process; greater emphasis is put on learning in terms of knowledge, skills, and competencies within courses and modules. This focus is on how learners learn and the design of effective learning environments (Donnelly/Fitzmaurice, 2005: 100). The ultimate goal should be a reflective self-initiated process aimed at the on-going acquisition of knowledge and skills during the students' studies with a commitment to lifelong learning. Such teaching settings can be projects, case studies, field work, etc.

c. criteria, firstly, for assessing whether the intended outcomes have been achieved and, secondly, for differentiating the performance of students.

The tool of assessment has to come from specific criteria of merit. Using these criteria as indicators means that the new curriculum meets the minimum requirements that constitute the curriculum itself viable. In other words, to assess efficiently one has to have a scale against which one can measure. The last remark refers to a vital goal of our project: the operationalisation of the findings, so that their evaluatory basis consists of observable and, where possible, measurable phenomena (Hellwig *et al.*, 2004: 150).

Having taken into consideration the above points the project of revising the curriculum was designed in eight stages:

In the first sequence the opinion and the needs of the students as well as the views of the business world were recorded. The students were asked to fill in a questionnaire with which we tried to record the demographic information concerning the student body and their opinion on the studied programme. This way information concerning the student's origin, the reasons for embarking on the particular course, their opinion on the quality of the teaching and on the equipment available and used, on the instructors, the curriculum, etc. could be collected. The students were also encouraged to suggest what they would consider to be an improvement to the programme curriculum. As far as the businesses are concerned we tried to record data on their structure, their employees, if the business would consider employing graduates of the department, which they regarded as the weak and strong points of graduates from Educational and Technological Institutions, if they were interested in stronger links concerning training of employees and consultancy services. Furthermore, we inquired about their use of linguistic services, their view on the current curriculum, potential improvements and if they would employ graduates from our department. At this initial phase of its life, the department did not have any graduates; this did not allow us to collect data at this stage about their postgraduate experience on the job market.

In a second sequence the curriculum in use has been assessed by external assessors. The purpose of this assessment was the identification both of the weaknesses and the unexploited potential of the department. The external assessment focused on the available facilities (lecture halls, language labs, etc.), IT equipment, the structure of the curriculum, the integration of the department into the local society and both academic and non-academic staff.

In a third sequence the curricula of similar courses were sought and compared. The comparison of curricula from the UK, France and Germany yielded invaluable information that resulted in a pool of experience and know-how to be used appropriately in the revision of our curriculum.

The fourth sequence was devoted to the development and adaptation of printed and online teaching/learning material. The material for eight subjects was redesigned: the main objective was to redesign the material for the subjects in question by moving away from a traditional, theoretical and instructor-orientated teaching to a student-centred learning experience in order to enhance the cognitive involvement of the students. The material was made online available for students.

The fifth sequence is also devoted to redesign teaching/learning. The focus was on modifying the classroom instruction itself by gearing it towards individualization and shifting teaching into an applied learning direction. In order to achieve this, the mode of instruction was supported, e.g., by tailor-made online simulation exercises for a number of courses.

In a sixth sequence 10 modules were revised. The main thrust of this sequence has been the amplification of the shift from theoretical to applied teaching in practicals and seminars; the aim has not only been to enhance the acquisition of skills by the students through enquiry-based learning, the introduction of applied research methods; it contributed to a more efficient instructor - student relationship that has both a higher degree of flexibility and greater interdependence, and it lead to smaller groups due to the nature of the instruction itself.

The seventh step aimed at distilling and integrating the experience gained so far

- a. from the evaluation of the questionnaires for students and businesses in the first sequence,
- b. the examination of curricula from similar departments offering the comparable courses in the UK, France and Germany,
- c. the information gained from the external assessment and
- d. the experimental feedback from the functioning of the department.

At the end of this stage a pilot programme curriculum was introduced.

In the last sequence the pilot curriculum is assessed by students, graduates and businesses. On the basis of the results of this assessment and the feedback from its application, the new curriculum of the department will be developed and introduced.

4. Shaping a new curriculum

As I have mentioned before, objective of a programme curriculum revision cannot be any other than achieving operationalization of the findings of the data collection part, i.e. to define the indicators for an effective new curriculum. The indicators should be regarded as the surface structure footing on a deep structure, resulting from the data provided by the external assessors, the opinion of the student body and that of the business world, the pool of the international experience created and – last but certainly not least – the feedback from the running of the department. In the case of our department the whole process yielded the following indicators:

The redesigned curriculum has to be in line with the identity of the course.

The instruction of the languages on offer has to be enhanced (English, German, French, Italian and Russian) and other languages have to be added to the curriculum (e.g., Albanian).

Theoretical and applied instruction have to be balanced; the thrust of the whole teaching/learning should be geared away from theoretical delivery into the direction of individualized task based learning experiences.

The curriculum has to be internationalized and structured along the envisaged lines of the European Area of Higher Education (The workload should be in line with the regulations and ECTS credits have to be 30 for every semester).

All languages have to be taught equally, the linguistic and cultural subjects have to be upgraded.

Within the frame of the same course the partition of the student body through different study tracks should be avoided.

The instruction of IT skills should be further enhanced.

Subjects with a thematic overlap have to be merged.

The curriculum has to be linked linearly with the student profile.

The curriculum has to foster and guarantee the transfer, use and promotion of the latest know how into business and industry.

5. Overall gains from the project

Apart from the strictly curricular changes, the department profited essentially from the programme curriculum revision project. To elaborate the indicators that guide the curriculum designer towards an effective programme curriculum facilitating learning for working might have been our main goal; On the other hand, there were also 'by-products' of the project that surfaced at various stages: These by-products were what the department gained apart from the revised programme curriculum. In particular, the gains for the department from the project as a whole are the following:

The most important output of the project is of course the identification of a number of operationalized criteria the new curriculum has to meet in terms of student and business expectations and of course - as a product at the end of the whole procedure - the redesigned programme curriculum.

The design of materials and processes to support the revised programme curriculum are a considerable gain for the department. For instance, a central feature of our curriculum revision project was the shift from traditional lecturing to student-centred learning through the active involvement of the student in learning experiences. New tailor-made teaching/learning material was designed to support this shift and was made online available.

The project encouraged the staff to retool through the active involvement in many stages of the endeavor.

In sequence three, the comparison of the curricula of similar UK, French and German tertiary education institutions gave birth to contacts with these institutions; these contacts produced cooperation agreements of various forms (ERASMUS/SOCRATES agreements for student/staff exchange, a membership in academic networks, etc).

The weak and the strong sides of the department were pinpointed. The assessment by two external academics highlighted the positive and – more important – the negative features of the earlier programme curriculum and the department. Visualizing the sources of potential teaching quality loss allows a conscious reflection on these aspects.

The staff gained an increased sensibility in terms of curriculum issues.

The staff cooperated. For a department offering a combined study track this is not a self-evident fact: instructors from various fields collaborated causing thus an interdisciplinary fermentation.

The whole process of collecting data contributed to making the department known in business circles.

So far so good. Hard evidence based on data collected through questionnaires is very helpful and can yield strong footholds to pursue the one or the other track when designing a new curriculum. However, teaching and learning is connected with more than hard evidence: I would also like to refer to an issue that cannot be recorded easily in terms of grounded data turned into operationalised criteria. I am referring to what has been defined as the “hidden curriculum” (McGoldrick, 2002: 6). McGoldrick denotes in his paper *Creativity and Curriculum design: what academics think as hidden curriculum the essential student learning which could take place almost at the unconscious level. It is the learning that could come from a number of sources, including academics’ behaviours, disciplinary ethos, or the influence of particular students in a group. What I believe, is that everything under the umbrella of the term hidden curriculum should remind both students and academics of their responsibility towards the whole process of teaching and learning as well as of mutual respect.*

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ⁱ The whole curriculum revision project at the Department for Applied Foreign Languages in Management and Commerce at the Epirus Institute of Technology is co-funded by the European Social Fund & National Resources – EPEAEK II.

ⁱⁱ See also Vlachopoulos 2004.

ⁱⁱⁱ For further information concerning this project see <http://www.epeaek.gr>.

^{iv} According to Papakonstantinou (2005) the experience concerning assessment in Greek higher education stems from projects conducted in Technological Educational Institutes and the postgraduate courses run by the universities.

^v The term *student profile* is a linear translation of the Greek *προφίλ του σπουδαστή*, which is a collective term denoting all the knowledge and the skills a graduate of a particular course has to have when graduating.

^{vi} This was so far the case. The programme curriculum split into two study tracks.