

THE UNIVERSITY IN THE COMMUNITY – LIFELONG LEARNING INITIATIVES AT BABES BOLYAI UNIVERSITY, ROMANIA

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ABSTRACT

The traditional roles and mission of higher education institutions (HEIs) as teaching and research providers have been broadened in order to accommodate activities with various stakeholders in the community (education, research and third-stream services as the OECD promotes). The third-stream services provided by the university refer mainly to knowledge transfer of research outputs, and to the involvement of HEIs in innovation production. Still, through specialized training courses, targeting the specific needs of various non-traditional learners, the university may contribute to the development of new mechanisms for professional development of both university alumni and *newcomers*.

This article aims to highlight the contribution of Babes Bolyai University in the community, as a lifelong learning programmes provider, as a form to capitalize the relevant expertise of teachers and trainers and to validate it on the training market. From the project *University in the community: granting access to Lifelong Learning (LLL) programmes*, to the new initiative of open courses targeting the development of transferrable competencies and niche specialization, Babes Bolyai University is developing new forms of community engagement as a professional training provider for the business environment and local communities as well.

Babes Bolyai University initiatives will be disseminated to the participants in the conference, in order to benefit from experts' feedback, in order to exchange views and practices, and to encourage future partnerships in lifelong learning projects.

CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES FOR UNIVERSITIES

Universities are facing so many challenges that need to be addressed in a highly competitive international environment:

- *the need for excellence in teaching activities* (the student-centred approach in teaching and learning to offer a genuine improved student experience for a generation of digitally literate *millennials*)¹
- *the need to innovate in research* and to facilitate knowledge and technological transfer in the business community (universities are more and more present as relevant actors in innovation clusters, generating both radical and incremental innovation, becoming innovative organizations)
- *the need to respond properly to the accountability pressure* coming from various stakeholders: students and their families, public bodies, taxpayers, politicians, business environment, as well as local communities
- *the need to continuously adapt* to the dynamics of national educational policies
- *the need to diversify funding sources* (the scarce governmental funding per student capita to be complemented with national and international funding schemes, based on educational and research projects) etc

¹ Dzuiban et al., (2005) - *Blended learning and the Generations*, available at: <https://cdl.ucf.edu/files/2013/10/Online-blended-generations-presentation.ppt>

HEIs AND THEIR MULTIPLE ROLES

Universities are relevant actors performing on three interconnected stages: education, research and third-stream services.

As far as education is concerned, the last decades have been dominated by efforts to reach ambitious objectives, such as: promoting active learning based on both teachers and students' commitment to perform better; developing blended learning as an effective tool to integrate ICT in tertiary education; fostering continuous curriculum updating relevant to labour market needs; developing highly attractive programmes for the new generations of students (they "place a high value on opportunities for interaction, collaboration and active learning and [...] the majority work part-time, asking for a decreased average study load"²).

Currently, academic research is facing many challenges, among which we have identified the following:

- difficulties in accessing national and international funding for research projects, in the never-ending race to *make the most of the shrinking resources*
- difficulties in recruitment and retention of highly recognized researchers (tough competition from corporations with performing R&D departments)
- designing *transferrable* research results – research results as outputs in technological transfer
- the increasing pressure for excellence and relevance, coming from different stakeholders – funding bodies, business environment, local communities, public authorities, etc
- the need for multidisciplinary national or international research teams and for collaborative networks to foster radical innovation

The demographic evolution and the skill shortages need also to be addressed, and diversifying the student base represents one of the main mechanisms to contribute to labour market needs. The fast-changing fields of expertise, the constant pressure to meet and indeed exceed performance indicators, the search for excellence in various niches require authentic commitment to lifelong learning for both medium and highly skilled employees. The university as a lifelong learning programmes provider should address:

- the need for new skills and competencies required by the new business models (IT skills, intercultural communication, technological culture, entrepreneurship and social skills)
- the new types of employees (more results-oriented, agile, holistic, eager to enjoy both professional and personal fulfilment)
- the focus on transferrable competencies as a *must* for the great majority of the new occupations
- the valuable offering mix between formal, non-formal and informal learning
- the need to focus on brand recognition – university as high-quality training provider in the community
- the challenge of designing sound financial models for the training programmes

² National Science Foundation (2009), *Current challenges in University Teaching & Learning: Building Excellence in Undergraduate STEM students*, available at: https://www.aas.org/sites/default/files/content_files/2009.pdf

Third-stream services are most often associated with all the activities that generate, use, apply, and / or exploit knowledge outside the academic environment³. Business counselling and consultancy as well as business-oriented research have represented the main activities that connected the HEIs to the business environment. However, in-house training programmes on fine-tuned topics based on authentic need analysis and customized training models have gained more and more relevance to the complex partnership between academia and the business community.

LIFELONG LEARNING IN ROMANIA – FACTS AND FIGURES

Promoting lifelong learning through a well-articulated mechanism should represent an important priority for Romania, in order to better address the low participation of the adult population in lifelong learning programmes (5 times lower than the EU average).⁴

Lobbying activities by NGOs have finally led to the adoption of the National Strategy for Lifelong Learning, aimed at improving participation in LLL programmes and increasing the labour market relevance of those programmes. The most relevant active measures are meant to broaden access to lifelong learning opportunities for people who are usually underrepresented (i.e. older workers, low-skilled people, Roma, women, rural residents, young people in transition from school to work, persons with disabilities), but also to provide opportunities for other target groups such as teachers and professors, adult learners, training providers, employers, etc.

According to the National Strategy on Lifelong Learning (issued in 2016):⁵

... the LLL service providers operating in Romania include public and private training institutions, employer associations, chambers of commerce and industry, unions, non-governmental organization, and popular universities. At present, more than 2,000 training providers are offering training programmes across the country. Around 60% of them are private providers, 20% are NGO and 20% are organizations financed by public funds. More than 1.3 million certificates have been issued by authorized providers since 2004. Nowadays, the participation of higher education institutions in the market of LLL service provision is limited, despite plunging enrolments in the past years and the opportunities of the LLL market.

In line with the EU target, Romania's main strategic objective for 2020 is that at least 10% of the adult population (aged 25-64) should participate in lifelong learning activities. This objective is covered by three strategic pillars that include coordination, funding and regulatory actions:

Pillar 1: Access and incentives for participation

Pillar 2: Quality and relevance

Pillar 3: Partnerships for better information

According to the National Institute of Statistics, in 2011 only 1.6% of the total working-age population in Romania participated in lifelong learning programmes, versus 8.9% in the EU-27. Five years later, in 2016, the rate had dropped further to an alarming 1.2%! In Romania, the concept of continuing education has not as yet been fully embraced (only in 1995 was adult education defined as a separate educational activity in the Law of

³ Molas-Gallart, J. and Castro-Martinez, 2007, *Ambiguity and conflict in the development of "Third Mission" indicators*, *Research Evaluation*, 16(4), 321-330.

⁴ ANC – Istorice EFP, available at: http://www.anc.edu.ro/documente/Istoric_EFP.pdf

⁵ Available at: <http://pubdocs.worldbank.org/en/944481496304564701/The-National-Strategy-for-Lifelong-Learning-mare.pdf>

Education). Many actions need to be taken: from awareness campaigns targeting employees (according to a Eurostat study carried out in 2011, the top three obstacles to participation in education and training for Romanian respondents were: 1. *No need*, 2. *Too expensive*, 3. *Conflict with work schedule*), employers (only 1 in 5 enterprises provided training to their staff in 2011, approximately 10% less than in 2005), the unemployed and NEETs, as well as financial incentives for those involved in professional training.

According to the National Institute of Statistics ⁶, in 2011 the average participation in education for the 25-34 age group was 15% in the EU-27 and 4.1% in Romania. The proportion of young employees aged 15 to 24 who participated in formal or non-formal education was 2.1% in 2011, 11.4 percentage points lower than the European average. In rural areas, there is a shortage of vocational training providers with the specific projects under the Development of Human Resources Sectoral Operational Programme attempting to cover these needs. Only 10% of Romanian young people go abroad for formal or non-formal educational purposes, a rather low percentage when compared to the European average (14%) or to the ten EU countries reporting more than 20%.

BABES BOLYAI UNIVERSITY (BBU) – PROFESSIONAL TRAINING PROVIDER IN THE COMMUNITY

Babes Bolyai University is a traditional, Humboldtian type of institution, with deep roots in Central Europe and strong international academic ties. Its origins date back to 1581, which makes it the oldest institution of higher education in Romania.

It is the largest Romanian university (approximately 45,000 students and 1,700 faculty staff), situated at the confluence of Eastern and Western cultures. Babes Bolyai University is a top university in Romania, with 21 faculties (17 faculties included activities through Hungarian, and 9 faculties through German). For the students enrolled in our institution there were 337 study programmes, undergraduate and master's degrees offered through Romanian; 119 undergraduate and master's programmes through Hungarian, and 18 such programmes offered through German. Multiculturalism represents one of the most relevant strong points of the institution.

Babeş-Bolyai University was recently classified by the Ministry of Education as a “university of advanced research and education”. In the *Best Global Universities 2015* ranking Babes-Bolyai University ranked 560th in the world; and in *The Times Higher Education* rankings for 2015-2016, Babeş-Bolyai University was the single university in Romania placed in the 501-600 category, at a similar level to other traditional universities in Central and South-Eastern Europe such as Krakow, Warsaw, Budapest, Bratislava and Ljubljana. In 2015 also Babeş-Bolyai University was nominated for the research excellence award offered for the first time by Scopus (Scopus Research Excellence Award).

Babes Bolyai University offers lifelong learning and e-learning programmes for adults interested in developing or upgrading professional skills. Conscious of its role in and responsibilities to civic society, Babes-Bolyai University has always undertaken an active educational role in the community, providing educational offerings and adapting them to the needs expressed by members of society. On this basis, in the last 5 years BBU has defined and developed a platform for lifelong learning targeted at all lifelong learners interested in continuing education at BBU.

The focus on LLL programmes has become more and more visible since specific objectives, clear activities and verifiable indicators were included in the University's annual

⁶ www.insse.ro

operational plan (a specific tool for strategic management). The main objective relevant to LLL in the plan over the last three years refers to continuous improvement and diversification of the LLL courses' portfolio (at least five new programmes to be launched and validated on the training market every year).

From the project *University in the community: granting access to Lifelong Learning programmes* to the new initiative of open courses targeting the development of transferrable competencies and niche specialization, our university has been developing new forms of community engagement as a professional training provider for the business environment as well as local communities.

In 1997, Babes Bolyai University launched the *Centre for Continuing Education and Distance Learning* which aims to develop educational services for adult learners interested in lifelong learning programmes and e-learning relevant to their professional development. Thus, the process of creating and implementing LLL courses has been driven by market needs:

- the genuine interest in professional reorientation
- the rise of new forms of employment (part-time, flexitime, e-working)
- the new skills and competencies required by the new business models
- the focus on transferable competencies (digital skills, cross-cultural communication, project management, entrepreneurship, etc)
- the rise of new forms of teaching and learning (on-campus teaching and learning is being complemented by online courses, flexible forms of courses and seminars to meet the non-traditional learners' needs, etc)

The main educational services offered by the Centre are represented by:

1. Professional training for both administrative and academic staff (digital skills, teaching methods, train the trainers, project management, academic writing)
2. Post-graduate courses certified by the Ministry of Education
3. LLL courses certified by the Ministry of Labour
4. Open courses for all adult learners in the community

In order to offer a better understanding of the progress made by the *Centre for Continuing Education and Distance Learning*, we choose to briefly present the most relevant initiatives that raised awareness of and commitment to LLL programmes within our local community: the project *University in the community: granting access to Lifelong Learning programmes*; the specialised training for faculty staff, and the *open courses programme*.

Launched in 2013, in partnership with and financially supported by the local authorities, the project *University in the community: granting access to Lifelong Learning programmes* was intended to open up university courses to the general public, and it managed to successfully attract 135 participants in the last 5 years, out of which almost 12% passed the final exams and received a certificate.

Even if we have witnessed a low number of participants completing certification to date, the initiative allows members of the community to access the university for the first time, or to return to the university and enjoy the academic experience. Unfortunately, despite the high initial interest for the diverse educational offerings, participants struggle to attend the courses and seminars scheduled in various departments of the university. Some of these participants later opt for LLL programmes certified by the Ministry of Labour (our current offering includes programmes in entrepreneurship, project management, train the trainers, security management, vocational counselling, and skills assessment, arising from the Centre's efforts to provide educational programmes to meet the learners' needs).

Another ambitious goal was to offer free-of-charge specialised training for faculty staff to address their expectations identified by a needs analysis initiative launched three years ago. We consider that we have had significant success in meeting this goal with (since 2016) more than 150 researchers and teachers trained in academic writing; more than 150 administrative staff trained in digital skills (graphics and office related programmes); and more than 40 participants in a technical entrepreneurship programme (the first programme based on special co-training: one university lecturer and one business trainer). The enthusiasm for and involvement in these courses of both trainers and participants represented the highest reward, as one participant stated. The programme has become popular among faculty staff, due to the hands-on nature of the training and the transferability of the skills learned to everyday tasks. Therefore, we are really motivated to preserve and develop these LLL programmes in the years to come.

In 2017, we decided it was high time to find a proper response to one specific need articulated by the business community: flexible, short, interactive and specialised courses to develop specific skills for their employees, delivered by experienced faculty trainers.

Therefore, we set out to design a simple, 2-page procedure for *open courses* (our university is pioneering this programme at the national level). This procedure was analysed closely and approved unanimously by the Administration Council in January 2018. The first step taken by the Centre was to disseminate the procedure among the LLL faculty specialists, and to clarify all the details (both financial and administrative) relating to the steps to be undertaken both at Department level and University Administration level. A few months later, two Departments (Political Sciences and Sociology) launched and successfully organised two fee-based open courses, and another six departments are ready to promote their offerings to the business community. This programme is meant to capitalize on the relevant expertise of faculty teachers and trainers, and to validate it on the training market in an accountable manner.

CONCLUSIONS

Facing the challenges of international competition, HEIs need to find a balance between high-quality teaching and learning, excellence in research and efficient third-stream services.

The dynamics of the education system and training market demand an active role for HEIs as relevant actors with useful contributions to make in the professionalization of LLL programmes.

National funding schemes should address the challenges HEIs are facing nowadays, by granting incentives to open up education, to develop more flexible modes of delivery and to diversify their student population.

Babes Bolyai University, one of the most competitive and prestigious HEIs in Romania, is strongly committed to fostering the development of LLL programmes, to preserving the traditional projects and programmes, and to expanding the innovative flexible programme of open courses both in terms of course topics and training methods.

The support from university management, the responsible involvement of lecturers, the enthusiastic feedback from both faculty staff and non-traditional learners in the community are all key strengths that we want to exploit in order to make the most of the current opportunities in the training market, with the goal of becoming national leaders in LLL programmes among HEIs in Romania.

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