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MANAGEMENT OF UNIVERSITY STUDY PROGRAMS FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE

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Abstract

In the current context of making high level qualifications, the university environment wrestles with a series of questions regarding the necessity of ensuring a better adaptation of the graduates' skills to the needs of the labour force, which results in ensuring a better coherence of university professional training programs.

If, not long ago, the performance of university study programs was based on the professionalism and personal commitment degree of each teacher, now more and more emphasis is put on the team work. Under these circumstances, the purpose of the study is to highlight the need to perform in universities such a specific management to university professional training programs. This problem is approached from the perspective of several basic questions: Are there theoretical justifications supporting the necessity of a management specific to university professional training programs? Do the usual university practices reveal the necessity of a specific management of the professional training programs made in the academic environment? How can the specific management of university professional training programs be defined? What are the dimensions of the management specific to university professional training programs? Who can ensure the specific management of university professional training programs?

The conclusion of the article is that the assurance of a specific management of university professional training programs involves the preparation of a coherent strategy for the design and implementation of such a program, conceived through combining the program philosophy and the university pragmatics axes.

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Keywords: Academic qualifications, university professional training programs, university professional training programs management, "distributed" management of university professional training programs.

1. Introduction

It is easy to notice the existence at a European level and at a national level of constant concerns to ensure the internal and external quality of university programs. In the current context marked by permanent reviews and curricular reforms, the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education traces several basic coordinates in the field of definition, design and assessment of the skills offered by these programs. Generally, through the university programs, two fundamental categories of graduates are formed: a. researchers and b. professionals – who will work in concrete activity fields. The ambition of the university environment is to confer on all graduates both skills for the research field and practical skills necessary to exercise professions which are well-defined in the nomenclature of the qualifications agreed at a national level. On the other hand, the labor market which is open to high level university qualifications is more and more flexible and unpredictable. We can say that faculties perform their activity at the interference of the external requirements regarding the quality of education with the internal quality standards and with the labor market formulating permanent criticisms to graduates' preparation. In their turn, students bring in such equation higher and higher expectations to teachers and the university training offered to them. In addition, there is the competitive condition installed in the university environment further to the launching of the process related to the classification and hierarchization of institutions and study programs.

It goes without saying that, under these circumstances, the UTPM (university training program management) becomes more complex.

2. Are there Theoretical Justifications Supporting the Necessity of a Management Specific to University Professional Training Programs?

The theory analysis, but especially the analysis of university practices, reveals that, usually, the study program management is ensured by the head of the didactical team designing and ensuring the implementation of such program. Most of the tasks of such head are bureaucratic: the head manages the didactical team, establishes tasks and roles for the teachers teaching in that study program, establishes the temporary reference points for the program performance (the timetable), coordinates the activities for assessing learning results in accordance with the criteria established and agreed at an internal level.

These tasks are associated, usually in a limited manner, to curricular management.

In a much more realistic vision, the management of the contents of training programs should target much more comprehensive aspects – as recommended by the newer curricular theories signaling the necessity to adopt integrative visions on professional training processes. In this spirit, L. Craig Wilson highlights, ever since 1971, the interactive nature of the areas of curriculum, namely the organised disciplines of knowledge, the human processes and the unique attitudes and values an individual acquires toward and about himself, his reference groups, and his society (apud Paul A. Nelson, 1973, p. 313) .

Those who set all these mechanisms and conditions in motion are, of course, the people.

This is the reason why the human resource issue and the manner to use human resources for various professional purposes represent a constant concern of theoreticians. They highlighted that in any work team people have different skills and abilities, which leads to the creation of new potential

resources, which deserve to be valorized from a managerial point of view. An interesting solution is offered in this respect by Edwin Hutchins who, leaving from the premise that cognition is socially distributed, proposes a new type of management of human resources: distributed leadership. He considers that 'These systems start by designing an initial model—or set of models—that establish key leadership roles, how those roles will be deployed to support teams of teachers and what processes the system will need to support the new structure. They then pilot and refine these models, gathering feedback from stakeholders and making improvements based on what they learn' (Hutchins, 1995, p.51).

In our opinion, such a vision can also be assimilated in the university environment where it can be adapted to the specific nature of the study program management.

3. Do the Usual University Practices Reveal the Necessity of a Specific Management of The Professional Training Programs Made in the Academic Environment?

In the context of the increase of the general interest of the universities everywhere to optimize the quality of study programs, we also notice the Romanian concerns to find certain levers and instruments supporting this process. We note, in this respect, the remarkable results obtained at the level of achieving a better organization of university study programs after the creation in 2005 of the Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ARACIS). ARACIS prepared standards, strategies and procedures to credit and authorize university study programs (according to ARACIS Guide, 2006), suggesting, among others, certain manners for the internal coordination of such programs. However, the agency did not intend to intervene in detail in the manner in which universities organize their activities internally, but establishes types of results and relevant effects for achieving quality education. Thus, the manner to perform the study program management is at the discretion of each supplier of university programs.

On the occasion of the visits ARACIS makes in universities, it is established that certain program suppliers have better concerns and results in the UTPM field, others are less concerned with such aspects. A situation which drew attention on the importance of the university professional training program management was created in Romania on the occasion of the debates on the necessity to rethink the national teachers' training program. The initiative belonged to the "Coalition for education" Federation which launched a public debate organized under the title "Romania educated" (2016). On this occasion, 133 public testimonies/depositions were prepared, within which the importance of the management of the study programs on which the granting of the teacher qualification is based was highlighted. Also, *the necessity to professionalize management positions, through their opening to the outside of the system and other aspects related to the formation and role of human resources in education* were underlined (See: coalitiaedu.ro). These types of conclusions challenge the university environment to rethink the managerial practices based on which study programs are generally made, all the more so as there are no initiatives to standardize this activity.

4. How Can the Specific Management of University Professional Training Programs Be Defined?

Our recent studies highlighted that there is little concern to define university professional training program management. We suppose that, in the vision of many practitioners, this activity type does not require a distinct specialization but can be limited to the exercise by the department heads of the 5 general management functions defined by Fayol, (1917), *i.e.*: planning, organization, management, coordination, control.

Consequently, the concern of department heads is especially oriented to the cognitive and cognitive-formative aspects of the performance of university programs. Actually – as already highlighted! - UTPM is a management type not limited to curricular aspects, but supposes the strategic handling of several factors and conditions ensuring the performance of the study program all the way, from the design stage to the graduates' integration on the labor market.

From a practical point of view, the managerial process is to ensure the 'inspired' complementarization of at least four coordinates: the specific contents of the university training program (UTP); the trainers' team ensuring the implementation of the study program; the training needs of immediate beneficiaries (the students); the expectations of the targeted long-term beneficiaries/employers.
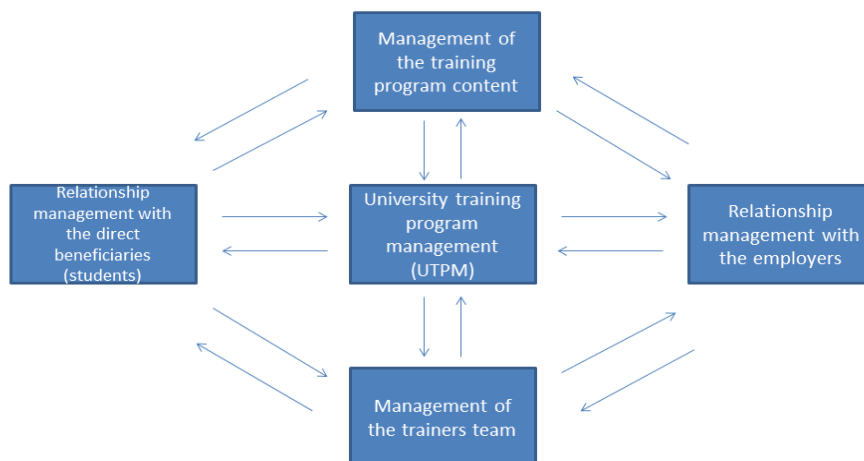

Figure 1. Relationships between the basic coordinates of UTPM

The use of the term *inspired* takes into account that any management type – no matter how well grounded from a theoretical point of view – supposes the confrontation with situations and/or factors with an unpredictable, conjunctural nature.

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From a technical point of view, 'ensuring the management of a study program supposes going through several stages which are absolutely necessary: establishment of the team of experts involved in the implementation of the study program, preparation of/discussion on the graduate's competence profile by the team members, association of each discipline to be studied to the general or specific competences it can develop, assumption by each teacher of the task of developing the competences distributed to the discipline he/she teaches, design and performance of a periodic evaluation – by the team of experts – to verify the extent to which the specific and partial competences of the study program were acquired, identification of the difficulties and organization of remedial programs, achievement of refresher programs before holding study completion exams, selection of the theoretical and practical contents to be included in examination tests according to the criterion of relevance for the graduate's competence profile' (Ezechil, 2013, p.10).

However, students' role is not passive. On the contrary, 'they have to be involved in the preparation of professional projects based on permanent professional training' (Langa, 2015).

5. What Are the Dimensions of the Management Specific to University Professional Training Programs?

Accentuating the premise that the aspects which are defining for the good operation and implementation of university study programs are complex and of high diversity, we consider that UTPM supposes the achievement of a balanced combination between curricular management and distributed leadership. It means, therefore, that UTPM does not represent a global approach of the process/program, from the height of the decisions from where then, when needed, corrections are applied.

Actually UTPM supposes several types of activities and, accordingly, several management types, even the existence of several managers.

The adoption of such a strategy is based on preparation of a philosophy on the study program which should be assumed by all the members of the teaching staff since it corresponds to the vision of the entire team promoting it.

Consequently, the application of this management formula supposes the consideration of the following dimensions:

Table 01. Management types specific for UTP

Management type	Specific activities
Management of designing the study program	WHO and HOW prepares the program philosophy?
	How does the study program refer to the university qualifications defined at a national level?
	How is the reference of the study program to the professional standards agreed through the national policies made?
	How is the consultation of the economic environment (of the potential employers) regarding the targeted professional skills made?
	What is the profile of professional skills to be acquired by the graduates? How are professional skills distributed to education disciplines?

Management of the trainers' team (in the vision of the distributed leadership)	What is the contribution each trainer/teacher can bring through the taught discipline to the achievement of the graduate's skill profile?
	How can the activities of the teachers participating in the performance of the study program be correlated and complementarized?
Curricular management	How can the necessary adjustments and corrections be made so that trainers act continuously as a team?
	How is the transfer of knowledge, skills, attitudes made in a sequential manner (through the education disciplines) without losing sight of the professional model in its entirety?
Management of the program implementation	How will we know if each teacher correctly and completely achieved his/her training tasks through each education discipline?
Management of the graduates' integration on the labor market	How are the theoretical and practical applicative foreseen results obtained? Which are the instruments by means of which learning results are assessed? How do students react to the formulated requests? What is the feedback they offer to the teaching staff?
Management of the necessary material resources	To what extent do the skills offered to graduates correspond to the needs on the labor market? How is the continuous optimization of programs made depending on such needs?
Management of the relationships with the strategic partners	Are training spaces endowed accordingly? Are learning aids (courses, support materials, informational technologies) of good quality and well adapted to the didactical purposes established upon program launching?
	HOW and WHO establishes the contacts with with the strategic partners (education school units, enterprises, specialized professional bodies etc)? How can the relationships with the strategic partners be optimized?

Therefore, the table above puts in a relationship the different management types with different activities which are associated to university study program design and performance stages. It is understood that the five functions of the general management mentioned by Fayol could be applied at the level of each of the management types highlighted above.

The fundamental question arising from here is: who can ensure the general management of a university study program so that all such dimensions can be coordinated and complementarized?

6. Who Can Ensure the Specific Management of University Professional Training Programs?

As we know, older managerial theories followed the model of the hero manager, a true superman who knows everything and has a multidimensional expertise. In the university environment this model can still be found in the person of the department head who is vested with all the responsibility of ensuring the success of the program/programs he/she manages. In reply to such practices, reality itself demonstrates that overcharging a single person with duties is counterproductive. The optimum solution seems to be to promote a management type which is at the same time 'position-based and distributive' (OECD, 2003, p. 3). This model is based on the idea of maintaining the program coordinator/the head of the department as a main actor in achieving the UTPM, provided that he knows 'to create teams with a shared mission' (Bierly, et al., 2016.p.42.).

In this manner the management is 'distributed' among several persons taking over parts/sequences of the program design and/or performance and collaborating in order to reach the common targets, agreed by team members.

Edwin Hutchins offers a concrete strategy for the application of such strategy when he proposes: 'these systems start by designing an initial model—or set of models—that establish key leadership roles, how those roles will be deployed to support teams of teachers and what processes the system will need to support the new structure. They then pilot and refine these models, gathering feedback from stakeholders and making improvements based on what they learn' (1995, p.51).

The application of the distributed management formula offers several advantages which are easy to verify in practice:

- the achievement of a better coordination of the teams of teachers participating in the program performance;
- the better correlation/complementarization of cognitive and cognitive-applicative tasks of the training process which are distributed to the disciplines in the curriculum plan;
- the better awareness by each teacher of his/her roles regarding the teaching of a certain education discipline until the program strategic targets are reached.

There are, also, of course, certain risks in applying distributed management which can delay (even eliminate!) the occurrence of the abovementioned advantages:

- the program philosophy may not be well understood and appropriated by the members of the teaching staff;
- the department head may attempt to continuously impose his/her own vision limiting the manifestation of his/her colleagues' initiative and expertise;
- the teams may not collaborate with one another but, on the contrary, work fragmentarily, totally ignoring what the other colleagues do.

For all the mentioned reasons, the main 'ingredient' ensuring the success of such a combined managerial formula is the creation of a team of honest experts.

7. Conclusions

Many Romanian higher education institutions face the necessity to optimize the university study program management. Most of them are aware of the advantages of distributing managerial roles to a team of teachers sharing their activities and the liability to perform them. It is easy to establish that where such aspects awareness degree is increasing attempts to put this model into practice also appeared and the desirable results soon occurred.

The basic observable indicators for the appearance of the expected positive effects are: the coherence of intentions, the coherence of the taken actions and the coherence of the obtained results.

All these become possible when the person ensuring the general management knows 'how to work towards whole-staff consensus on school vision' – as recommended by an important document of OECD (2003, p.20).

The authority of this person is not affected as a result of sharing power. The person's main role is comparable to that of an orchestra director. Each musician manifests in a disciplined manner focusing in

the performance on his/her own instrument, but only the director ensures, by his/her activity, that the general esthetic effect is obtained.

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