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**ASSESSMENT OF THE REGIONAL AND HUMAN GEOGRAPHY
CURRICULA AT BABEȘ-BOLYAI UNIVERSITY**

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Abstract

The competitive education systems are the ones with the highest ability to seize, implement and optimise new study and research paradigms. The Geography School of Cluj-Napoca, Romania, at Babeș-Bolyai University follows this streamlining of curriculum elements, which, in the case of Regional and Human Geography, allows a series of changes that this paper shows. The research is based on the observation that there are thematic overlaps, gaps or incoherencies when tackling the contents of courses correlated to Regional and Human Geography, at Bachelor and M.Sc. level in Babeș-Bolyai University, Faculty of Geography. We analysed the education plans of all the specialisations for the Romanian study language, in order to determine the position of the Regional and Human Geography courses (percentage, name, study order, similarities). We also analysed the Regional and Human Geography course charts. Our evaluation was based on several criteria: theme similarity, thematic chronology, and theme relevance. In this faculty, the actual curricula and syllabi are very heterogeneous. To increase the quality of teaching and learning, both curricula and syllabi for Regional and Human Geography of each specialisation and level (Bachelor's and M.Sc.) must be improved as the present evaluation showed that there is a good potential for this.

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1. Introduction

The intensity and speed of the current information flows in the fields of Human and Regional Geography have a global reach, being profoundly connected with the academic heart of the education systems. The capacity to seize such flows dictates the alignment and implementation of know-how policies at the curricular level. The competitive education systems are the ones with the highest ability to seize, implement and optimise new study/research paradigms. The Geography School of Cluj-Napoca also follows this trend of streamlining the elements of a certain curriculum, which, in the case of Regional and Human Geography, allows a series of interventions, elements that this paper presents.

Regional Geography and Human Geography have been studied since 1920, in the two chairs of General and Human Geography and the Descriptive Geography of Romania, part of the Institute of Geography, an independent body in the Faculty of Sciences (Pop, 2007, p. 16), King Ferdinand I University of Cluj (founded in 1919). Human Geography, Political Geography and Economic Geography were studied in the cycle of General Geography courses, while the Geography of Romania and the Geography of Continents as part of the Regional Geography courses (Pop, 2007, p. 18). Between 1919 and 1947, the University of Cluj held the specialisation of Geography (Pop, 2007, p. 18).

During the communist period, following the education reform of 1948, in order to insure the training of Geography teachers and other specialists, in Cluj, Geography was associated with other disciplines, having a 4-5 year run: Geology-Geography – 4 years (from 1949-1950), Natural Sciences-Geography – 4 years (from 1954-1955), Physical Geography – 5 years (from 1955-1956), Biology-Geography and Geography-Biology – 4 years (from 1957-1958). Since 1953-1954, the Geography School of Cluj also educated two classes of hydrologists at the Hydrology specialisation (5 years). In 1962-1963, classes reverted to their interwar structure, as double specialisations were replaced by the Geography Section (5 years), and from 1977-1978 until 1993-1994, it was transformed into Geography and a Foreign Language (4 years) (Pop, 2007, pp. 48-53), with its first class graduating in 1980, and the last in 2008. Between 1945 and 1948, geographic education continued the interwar status quo, but after 1948, the curriculum was radically altered, with new disciplines emerging (i.e. Geography of the Socialist States, Geography of the Soviet Union, Political Economy, Marxism-Leninism, etc.) and others disappearing altogether (i.e. Cultural Geography, Geopolitics, Human Geography) (Ianoş, 2009, p. 9). In the mid-1960s, the Geography of the Soviet Union was eliminated, the Marxism-Leninism course was replaced by Political Economy and Scientific Socialism, and, at the end of the 1960s, a new one, Settlement and Population Geography course was introduced (Ianoş, 2009, p. 10). Between 1960 and 1989, the evolution was almost linear (Ianoş, 2009, p. 10). There were courses on the Physical Geography of Romania (a geosphere/layer approach, not a regional one), Geography of the Carpathians and Sub-Carpathians; Geography of the Plateaus and Plains of the Socialist Republic of Romania; Geography of Continents: Europe (one course); Asia (one course); America and Africa (one course); Economic Geography of Romania, Sectorial Economic Geography (for the world), Geography of Population and Settlements.

In 1990-1991, due to the newly established university autonomy, the Geography departments of Romania introduced significant curriculum changes, according to the professors' needs. Educational programmes were changed as well, and some classes that had been eliminated in 1948 were reintroduced (Social Geography, Cultural Geography, Geopolitics, Urban Geography, etc.). In 1990-1991, a 4 year-

Geography specialisation was introduced alongside Environmental Sciences – 5 years, with an admission exam, which remained in effect until the organisation of the Bologna examinations (2005-2006) (from 1990-1991), the Cartography, Geo-information, and Touristic Research colleges (3 years). The following years, new study programmes were introduced: Geography and a Foreign Language, Geology-Geography (4 years) in 1995-1996, Geography of Tourism, and Topography, Cartography and Cadastre (3 years), in 1997-1998, Territorial Planning (4 years) in 1998-1999, Geography of Tourism (4 years) in 2003-2004 (Pop, 2007, pp. 53-54). Master's studies were introduced in 1994, undergoing changes (name and contents): Human Geography and Regional Development; Dynamic and Applied Geomorphology (since 1994-1995), Water Resource Geography and Environment (in 1997), later renamed; Regional Geography (since 2001, in French), renamed as Regional Development; Territorial and Human Resource Administration (in 2003, in English), Integrated GIS in territorial planning and many more (Pop, 2007, pp. 55-56).

In 2005-2006, the geographic education system was restructured according to the Bologna Process, with three distinct degrees: Bachelor's (3 years), Master's (2 years), and Ph.D. (3 years). In 2005, Bachelor's studies at this faculty included Geography, Geography of Tourism, Territorial Planning, Cartography, while 2006-2007 saw the advent of Hydrology-Meteorology (Pop, 2007, p. 55). Between 2008 and 2014, the Bachelor's degree Land and Cadastral Measurements programme was accredited. After three generations of students (2008-2012; 2009-2013; 2010-2014) formed as land surveyor engineers, this programme did not get the accreditation to function anymore (https://senat.ubbcluj.ro/wpcontent/uploads/2013/10/INFO_SENAT_3_MARTIE_2014_UPLOAD_REDUCED.pdf). Master's programmes were certified: Geomatics, Touristic Planning and Development, Resources and Risks in the Hydro-atmospheric Environment, and Regional Planning and Development.

Scientific literature contains observations regarding the university Geography curriculum prior to 1989 (Dulamă & Ilovan, 2015, 2017; Pop, 2007) and the current one (Ianoș, 2009; Jucu, 2012, 2014; Dulamă & Ilovan, 2016). This paper will analyse the current curriculum for Regional Geography and Human Geography for all specialisations at the Romanian study language in the Faculty of Geography, at Babeș-Bolyai University, starting from the models of educational sciences. Potolea (2002, pp. 78-79) proposes a multidimensional approach to curriculum, following three analytical paths: structural, process, and product. *The structural path* comprises two models, including curriculum components and the relations between them: the triangle model (finalities, contents, time), and the pentagon model (finalities, contents, time, training strategies, assessment strategies). *The process path* includes three stages: planning, implementation, and assessment. *The product path* refers to the main curriculum products (learning plans, discipline charts, official university courses), as well as ancillary ones (support learning materials, student guides, practice notebooks, educational software, multimedia, etc.) and products specific to the didactic planning activity (projects for courses/seminars).

2. Problem Statement

After 1989, in the context of university autonomy and frequent changes in education legislation, the study of Geography faced many changes and challenges: the right and freedom to create university programmes, increase in the number of specialisations, students and professors, relatively free access to

foreign literature and professional visits, increase in the number of universities, including privately owned, that offered Geography courses. Due to the obligation to implement the Bologna Process at the Faculty of Geography and the wish to match the EU academic programmes, other changes occurred: decrease of Bachelor's studies from 4 to 3 years, decrease of the number of courses, the establishment of new specialisations, etc. The geographic university system, including Regional and Human Geography, had to adapt to these and to the significant differences in students' knowledge and competence. This research is based on the observation that there are thematic overlaps, gaps or incoherencies when tackling the contents of disciplines correlated to Regional and Human Geography, at Bachelor's and M.Sc.'s levels within Babeş-Bolyai University – Faculty of Geography. Now, it must search for curriculum optimisation solutions

3. Research Questions

Starting from the pentagon model of the curriculum (Potolea, 2002), the following research questions emerged: What is the status of the Regional and Human Geography disciplines in terms of curriculum products? What is the status of the curriculum of Regional and Human Geography when it comes to components and the relations between them? What is the course of the didactic process for the Regional and Human Geography disciplines? How can the above mentioned curriculum be improved?

4. Purpose of the Study

This study aims to assess the current status of the curriculum for Human and Regional Geography at the Faculty of Geography, Bachelor's and Master's studies (structural, process, and product) and propose optimisation measures for it.

5. Research Methods

The research materials are (a) the education plans of the Faculty of Geography, Babeş-Bolyai University, for Bachelor's degree, in *Geography, Cartography, Hydrology and Meteorology, Territorial Planning, Geography of Tourism*, and for Master's degree in *Geomatics, Touristic Planning and Development, Resources and Risks in the Hydro-atmospheric Environment, Regional Planning and Development*, (b) the discipline charts for Regional and Human Geography from these specialisations, (c) some university courses, (d) papers on university didactics, and (e) our didactic activity.

Methods. We collected data through participative observation, focus groups, and bibliographic research. For data processing, we employed document analysis, textual analysis of the contents, speech analysis, visual methods (for images).

6. Findings

6.1. Regional and Human Geography: curriculum products and optimisation proposals

Educational plan assessment – Bachelor's degree. The general structure of the curriculum is based on the academic year structure, with two semesters (5 semesters with 14 weeks and semester 6 with 12 weeks). The average number of hours/week is 22-26, depending on specialisation. The curriculum has two levels: *fundamental courses* (the core of Geography) and *specialisation courses*. The structure can

also include *additional courses*, from different areas, to insure rapid work integration for students (Ianoş, 2009). The ARACIS (the supervising body of the university curricula) specific standards for the 1st cycle in Geography considers 25 basic disciplines, covering almost equally the branches of Physical and Human Geography. The specialisation disciplines range between 13 for Cartography and 25 for the Geography of Tourism, with Hydrology and Meteorology – 16, Territorial Planning – 24, and Geography – 15 disciplines (Agenția..., 2016). In the *Geography specialisation* (G), there is a balance between the two categories: seven for Human Geography, distributed across all semesters (*Introduction to Human Geography, Population Geography, Geography of Settlements, Economic Geography, Human Geography of Romania, Urban and Rural Geography* (optional), *Political Geography*) and seven for Regional Geography, held during semesters two to six (*General Regional Geography, Geography of Continents: Europe, Geography of Continents: America, Geography of Continents: Australia, Oceania, Antarctica* - optional, *Geography of Continents: Africa* - optional, *Regional Geography of Romania*). The specialisation of *Cartography* (C) has three courses of Regional Geography (*Regional Geography of Romania, Regional Polarizations and Disparities on the extra-European Continents* - optional, *General Regional Geography* - not mandatory). In *Hydrology-Meteorology* (HM), there is a course of Regional Geography (*Regional Polarizations and Disparities on the extra-European Continents* - optional). In *Territorial Planning* (TP) and *Geography of Tourism* (GT), Regional Geography courses exceed the ones of Human Geography. Territorial Planning includes five Regional Geography courses (*General Regional Geography, Regional Geography of Romania, Regional Planning and Local Development, Regional Development Policies and Territorial Planning, Romanian Models of Regional Development* - optional) and one Human Geography course (*Demographics and Habitat*). Geography of Tourism includes four Regional Geography courses (*Geography of Continents: Europe, Regional Geography of Romania, Geography of Continents: Africa, Asia, America Australia and Oceania* - optional, and *Touristic Regions*) and one Human Geography course (*Human Geography*).

For these two categories, different number of credits were awarded from a total of 180: 56 credits - 31.07% at G, 26 credits - 14.42% at TP, 24 credits - 13.31% at GT, 8 credits - 8.88% at C, 4 credits - 2.22% at HM. Analysing education plans, one can see that each specialisation has a certain identity (Precup & Chiş, 2017) and that there are no thematic overlaps which might be deduced from the name of the disciplines. ARACIS supervises and assesses the curricula, so that assessment criteria enables implementing university autonomy and the credit transfer system useful for student international mobility and recognition of university diplomas in the states abiding the Bologna process.

Type of discipline. At Bachelor's level, 19 Regional and Human Geography courses are considered fundamental disciplines (FD) and 12 are viewed as speciality (SD). *The Regional Geography of Romania* (FD) has a privileged status as it is taught at all specialisations, while *General Regional Geography* (FD) is taught at 3 specialisations (G, C, PT). Two specialisations give importance to the *Geography of Continents*, taught at four disciplines at Geography specialisation, one being optional, and at two disciplines at Geography of Tourism, one being mandatory (*Europe*).

Number of courses/seminars/practical hours. The allocation of time resources (hours) for each course from the education plan is difficult. For each of the analysed courses, 2 hours/week are distributed. For most, there is one hour for practice, while only nine disciplines have 1 hour of seminar. All the

disciplines from Geography of Tourism are allotted seminar hours, and not practice hours, which indicates the importance of acquiring the theoretical knowledge for these disciplines, at the expense of practical abilities. *Geography of Continents: Europe* is assigned (G, GT) one hour each for practice. *General Regional Geography*, at the G and TP specialisations, has seminar hours, at C and HM practice, indicating a different approach. Two disciplines have 2 hours each for practice (Economic Geography) at G and 2 hours of seminar for Human Geography at GT. To fully develop competences, we propose all disciplines have practical works, with fewer seminar hours.

Number of credits. Most disciplines, both fundamental and ancillary, have 4-5 credits. Exception: *Geography of Continents: America* (3 credits) at G and *Regional Geography of Romania* (6 credits) at GT, denoting the significance of the course despite the fact that no extra hours have been assigned.

Proposals for Bachelor's degree education plan optimisation. For Geography, we propose that the courses involving Romania be taken before the courses regarding the entire world. We suggest a mandatory study of all continents, since pre-university classes approach all continents. Another proposal is that *Theoretical Geography* should be studied in the 1st year, not in the 3rd. *Geography of Settlements* should be studied in the 3rd year, when students have general knowledge about the natural framework of geographical space (e.g. for understanding the particularities of settlements' spatial distribution, it is important that *Geomorphology* is studied first). Some mandatory and optional courses have similar topics approached in the curricula. The optional courses should be particularised. For Hydrology-Meteorology, there is a course on the *Regional Geography of Romania*. It would be adequate to this specialisation that the territory studied in such a course should be extended to the entire world and the course be mandatory. Elements of regional specificity from around the world could be introduced. For Geography of Tourism, studies should begin with the *Regional Geography of Romania* in the 1st semester, followed by *Geography of Continents: Europe* (reversal of courses), and *Geography of Continents: Africa, Asia, America Australia and Oceania* should be mandatory. Emphasis should mostly be put on applicative courses, and seminars should be replaced as much as possible by practical works. *Urban Tourism* and *Rural Tourism* should be studied in an integrated approach and in a single course (i.e. *Space, Place and Travel*).

Analysis of Master's degree education plans. There are two Human Geography courses for the *Touristic Planning and Development* programme, while the regional approach is present for the course on *Trends in International Tourism* (the concept of region should be included in its title). *Geomatics* does not include Regional and Human Geography courses, but it should offer them as students outside the Geography field chose this programme and have no former knowledge on university Geography. *Resources and Risks in the Hydro-atmospheric Environment* (RRHE) includes two Regional Geography courses (*Hydrological Syntheses and Regions* and *Integrated Planning of Hydrographic Basins*). *Regional Planning and Development* (RPD) has ten Regional Geography courses (*Regional Systems; Region and Geographic Regionalisation; Regional Development; The Regional System Environmental Component; Regional Development Strategies; Critical Regions; Cross-Border Regions; GIS in Regional Approaches; Disadvantaged Regions* - optional; *Regional Disparities* - optional) accounting for 49.16% out of a total of 120 credits (1st semester - 24 credits, 20%), (2nd semester - 17 credits, 14.16%), and (3rd

semester – 18 credits,15%). These course titles emphasise global themes, with no discipline tackling the topic of Romania.

Type of discipline. The Master's curriculum contains synthesis disciplines and detailed disciplines. RPD has four synthesis and six detailed courses, while RRHE, one synthesis course. Concerning the *number of course/seminar/practical hours*, the number of hours per week is lower for Master's programmes than in the case of the Bachelor's, with more emphasis on students' individual work. If for Bachelor's studies, all classes had 2 hours, Master's studies have four practical disciplines 1 hour. Three out of 11 courses have seminars, while the rest practice. We propose more practical works (for as many disciplines as possible).

Number of credits. The number of credits allotted per course is higher at Bachelor's degree level. Six credit courses are predominant, with the exception of two courses, one with 8 credits (*Hydrological Syntheses and Regions*), and one with 5 (*Critical Regions*).

Proposals for Master's degree education plan optimisation. There are no M.Sc. studies correlated to the *Geography* specialisation, therefore such a programme should be created, although students may attend any other existing programme so far. For *Touristic Planning and Development*, we propose two courses: *Specificity and Planning - Development Models in Tourism (Global)* and *GIS Applied in Tourism and Travel*. For all M.Sc. programmes, applied to their specificity, we propose a discipline on the *Advanced Techniques in Thematic Cartography*. Another proposal is the introduction in the *Geomatics* curriculum of the following disciplines: *Advanced Techniques in Thematic Mapping of the Natural and Anthropic Environment*, *GIS Applied in Hazard and Risk Mitigation*, *Big Data Modelling and Visualisation*. For the *Planning and Regional Development* programme, we propose two disciplines: *Territorial Identity and Development* and *The Complex Dynamics of Territorial Systems*.

Analysis of discipline charts and optimisation proposals. We analysed only a part of the charts for the Regional and Human Geography courses, as some were unavailable on the faculty website. There was no unitary approach at faculty or specialisation levels: charts were developed differently, based on the professors' competence level in educational sciences. The most significant differences were reflected by the professional and transversal competences, and the course general and specific objectives. To improve these curriculum products, as well as the professors' competence in developing and implementing them, we suggest organising workshops, debates, courses with expert guests from Didactics.

6.2. Regional and Human Geography: curricula analysis and optimisation proposals

To insure research rigour, we systemise findings and proposals based on the curriculum pentagon model (Potolea, 2002) and the competence theories (Andronache, Bocoş, & Neculau, 2015). Results originate from charts analysis, direct observations of didactic procedures, discussions with students and Geography professors.

a. Finalities are presented in the discipline charts as both results (professional and transversal competences) and challenges (objectives). *Professional competences* are explained differently between courses, with a high degree of generalisation and with no emphasis on specificity, making any correlation attempt to its assessment difficult. Some *transversal competences* were correlated with key competence domains from the National Education Law (2011). Phrasing of competences shows different views on the

geographic education objectives. *The general objective* is relatively vaguely phrased, for some disciplines emphasizing solely knowledge acquisition, not competence development. Specific objectives phrasing is similar to that of competences, their number varying from 2 to 20 (adequate number).

b. Contents are mostly presented as short titles, without details regarding subthemes, which gives us a vague image of the educational offer. A subtheme-detailed presentation would be useful for students as they would therefore be able to comprehend the internal logic of each discipline and systematise information during the learning process. The choice of themes reveals the author's vision regarding essential teaching elements. A relatively short list of references, mostly in Romanian was presented for each discipline. This should be expanded, updated and more international.

c. Training strategies. The charts itemise the teaching methods associated with courses and seminars. The teaching methods proposed to be used in class are professor-centred (introduction, presentation, explanation, problematisation), some aim to actively include students (conversation, case studies, map reading, comparisons). The exercise, an essential and highly used method in competence formation, is rarely included in the enumerations. Some classes take place in the field. Seminars/laboratories include expositional, teacher-centred methods, also used during courses, but are mostly dominated by student-centred methods (case studies, map reading/interpretation, debates, projects, document analysis, brainstorming, GIS analysis, team investigation, independent or controlled observation). During seminars, professors employ PowerPoint software and organise practical activities or team projects. The use of such a set of methods indicates the fact that professors employ a wide array of student communication methods (Cuc, 2013a, 2013b, 2014). There is a specificity of teaching strategies in Regional and Human Geographies, especially when compared to the initial formation of Geography professors in this faculty, where emphasis is put on role play and exercise, but also in comparison with the formation of teachers and professors from other specialties (Romania or Hungary) (Catalano & Chiş, 2016).

d. Assessment strategies. The charts contain lists of assessment methods that are associated with courses and seminars/lab works. Traditional evaluation methods are to be used: oral, written. Even though the charts do not mention it, discussions with students and professors alike have revealed that alternative and ancillary assessment methods are being used (portfolio, project, self-evaluation). These methods are a breeding ground for reflective thinking and independent learning in students (Peculea, Andronache, & Bocoş, 2017). Both teaching and evaluation methods indicate that professors take into account students' different learning styles in the development of their professional competences (Chiş & Grec, 2017).

Discipline charts mention *assessment criteria* for course and seminar/practice. These are formulated differently. Some mention abilities (to analyse and causally explain the elements required by the examination subject; to compare and synthesize; to correctly employ geographic notions; to express oneself concisely; to use and interpret general or thematic maps; to further use one's knowledge, etc.), others: problem, concept and methodology understanding; phenomena explanation; concept and methodology relation with relevant case studies; completion of tasks; development of study cases, individual study, and scrupulousness. We emphasize the criteria degree of systematisation and use of acquired notions, logical succession, argument quality, assimilation degree of terminology, and scientific

rigour. In addition, discipline charts mention the *minimal performance standard*. Since scientific literature and the official documents do not give any indications in relation to its description in the charts implies subjectivity in didactic planning and does not precisely designate the competence level for students to pass the exam.

7. Conclusion

The actual curricula and syllabi are very heterogeneous. To increase the quality of teaching and learning, both curricula and syllabi for Regional and Human Geography at the Faculty of Geography in Cluj-Napoca, for each specialisation and level (Bachelor's and Master's) must be reformed according to new trends and challenges in nowadays society and in the educational theory and practice. The present assessment showed that there is very good potential for this improvement.

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