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COMPETENCES OFFERED BY THE INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS AND EUROPEAN STUDIES UNIVERSITY PROGRAM – AN ARGUMENT FOR QUALITY IN ROMANIAN ACADEMIC EDUCATION¹

*Florentina CHIRODEA**

Abstract. *In order to face the challenges imposed by a competitive society, you must be competitive, that means to satisfy the customer's requests to the highest standards. The academic education is no exception to the need for quality training of future generations of specialists able to cope with multiple demands of contemporary society, relying heavily on the quality of supply and educational benefit. In this context, defining skills Bachelor's degree graduates play an important role in determining the quality of the educational offer. Even if this process is still in its infancy in Romania, important steps have been taken for developing the National Qualifications Framework. In turn, the National Qualifications Framework for academic education must be aligned to the requirements of national and even European occupational standards. Starting from the two theoretical concepts that are basis of the whole defining process of competences, the quality of the Bachelor's academic programs and the occupational standards, we propose to analyze the activities of the personnel of the European Studies and International Relations Department of the University of Oradea, of establishing the competences for the graduates of the International Relations and European Studies academic Bachelor studies. The process is an interesting and complicated one because the international relations and European studies are two inter-disciplinary fields, at its ending result a set of abilities and competences that must be compatible with the highest European standards.*

Keywords: *quality, academic education, abilities and competences, practice*

Introduction

The services are activities useful to the society, but that do not have as a result obtaining of products. In the services sphere are covered many activities, like trade, tourism, education, health, popularization of science, art and culture, defense, state administration, maintenance and repair of personal and public goods etc. The quality, a substantial part of services represents (STAS ISO 8402/1991) all the properties and characteristics of a product or service, which gives it its ability to meet the needs expressed or implied. Therefore, the quality of a service is not determined by the characteristics and properties which it has, but also by the extent to which the needs are expressed by the user or beneficiary, and other necessities which are not stipulated, but

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must be met. Among the quality characteristics of the service² the most important are: accessibility, competence, credibility, efficiency, flexibility, honesty and trust. Another aspect of quality is the degree of utility and it refers to the extent in which the service satisfies the customer's needs and therefore, in the case of the service entered in the market cycle, is sold (international standard ISO-9004-2/1991).

The definitions referring to the services, the quality of characteristics and the degree of their utility, shown above, let us frame the academic activity, including here the educational act as well as the research, in the category of services that contribute to the welfare of the society, generating the knowledge that is transferred to the social-economic environment (the Torino Polytechnic Rector, March 2007, Bucharest).

Moreover, according to the international standard ISO-9004-2/1991, the education is a service in which work internal and external customer-supplier relationships, and is similar to those operating in the business world. The quality of education measures the degree of the adequacy of service characteristics and service provision to the demands of society represented by operators, parents and especially students - as the main beneficiaries (Drăgulănescu - coord., 2000: 58).

A priority of the European Union agenda, as part of educational policy development process in different countries including Romania is developing qualifications frameworks in academic education. Moreover, in May 2000 the Council of Europe set 2010 as deadline by which Europe must become "the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world capable of sustaining the economic growth with more and better jobs and a greater social cohesion". Starting from the premise that the whole lifelong learning has become a necessity in Europe, the barriers between institutions and countries does not impede the access to education and training, but restricts the efficient use of already acquired knowledge and skills, educational policy makers at European level and called for implementation of a European Qualifications Framework considered a meta-framework to strengthen the links between national and sector frameworks, to facilitate and promote transparency, transfer and recognition of qualifications and competences at an European level. From this perspective, the current situation of the academic education in Romania is as follows (the *Strategy of the National Agency for Qualifications in Academic Education and Partnership with the Economic and Social Environment 2007/2009*):

- developing the National Qualifications Framework for academic education is a priority that both the government and the economic and social partners have identified it. It will be then included in the National Qualifications Framework which will include all qualifications officially recognized in Romania;
- funding the National Agency for Qualifications in Academic Education and Partnership with Economic and Social Committee (ACPART) by H.G. 1357/ 03.11.2005 as the national authority in the field by reorganizing APART;
- passed the *Law 288/2004 on the Organization of Studies from the Academic Education* referring to knowledge, general skills and specific learning outcomes related to the cycles of the Bologna system studies;
- the *Education Ministerial Order* was issued on the application number 3617/16.03.2005 regarding *the Generalized System of Transferable Credits*;

² The *characteristic of quality* is any feature or property of a service that is essential to satisfy the customer needs, or giving the ability to be useful (International Standard ISO-9004-2/1991 - *Management and Quality System Elements. Guide for Services*)

- it was issued the Ministerial Order no. 4868/07.08.2006 regarding the *Diploma Supplement* as document of European value (part of the Europass portfolio)
- it was adopted the *H.G. 1175/2006 on the List of Fields of Study Inside the Academic Education*, universities will decide on the principle of university autonomy, the qualifications to be awarded in these areas of course graduates;
- ACPART initiated the registration approach for academic education qualifications in the National Register of Academic Education Qualifications.

As shown, there is no currently legal document or a specific methodology for determination of qualifications in the academic education and a rigorous and coherent national qualifications framework (structure, registration and classification).

In this context, the responsibility of defining the most suitable and effective competences and skills for graduates of undergraduate study programs of universities is becoming a major target and also an additional argument for external reviews of key service quality (firms and employer organizations) as well as of graduates as in their double quality of internal customers (active participants in the educational process) and external customers (Drăgulănescu, 2007: 7).

Therefore the whole process of defining those skills and abilities may vary from one academic education institution to another, each department that manages a program of study assuming the steps for identifying and defining the powers given to graduates of a program of study, and their adaptation to the requirements of economic and social environment, mostly local, in which the university operates.

The two theoretical concepts that formed the basis of the whole process of defining competencies are quality programs of Bachelor and occupational standards. Once defined and analyzed, they will be landmarks for the case study that we propose, namely the collective approach of the Department of European Studies and International Relations (SERI), inside the University of Oradea, establishing competencies for graduates of the program of Bachelor's degree International Relations and European Studies (RISE). This process is more interesting and more complicated because the area RISE is an interdisciplinary field, with subjects from various fields like law, economics, international relations, political science, history or sociology. Also, because the Classification Profession has not clearly defined a profession for the graduates of this specialization, the performance, competencies defined respectively, were then "verified" by comparing them with the competencies defined for the field of European Studies at European level and employers with labor market requirements in Europe.

1. The quality of the academic licensing programs

The services of a university are considered of "quality" only when the university's products and processes satisfy the needs, requirements and expectations of customers and other internal and external partners. In other words, a university is of "quality" when, in addition to being resolved, the appropriate waiting, community socio-economic issues part forming specialists, in areas/sectors for which there is adequacy of labor market demand, endowed with skills, abilities, attitudes and behaviors that allow them to be employed shortly after graduation, to become immediately useful to organizations employing and to integrate rapidly in their technical, economic and social environment (Drăgulănescu, 2007: 7).

Developing the educational offer in a certain field of academic education begins with the design stage of the program of studies. To this end, the academic management of the faculty or department nominates a working group which aims to design the desired study program, which must be based on (Atanasiu, 2005: 2):

- the analysis of socio-economic need and academic curriculum development, identifying the target group of customers - prospective students and employers;
- identifying the legislative framework that allows the development of curriculum and requirements arising from the national regulations, local or institutional
- possible considerations and arguments related to strategic management of university and how it is interested in the curriculum development;
- identifying the program objectives, customer requirements relating to occupational and social skills expected by them after completion of the study program;
- identifying the expected results of studies designed program, expressed by portfolio skills, abilities, skills, you will get future students;
- summary information on similar programs of studies identified in national and international tender.

Following the above analysis the team series from the Department of Oradea has developed the mission, objectives and results of the study of international relations and European studies, stating the remit offered diploma and graduate academic qualification obtained.

The next phase of project development program is the university curriculum development, this step comprising the following (Atanasiu, 2005: 2):

- detailed definition of skills curriculum offered to students after graduation;
- characterizing the teaching and learning process and the formation of desired skills
- developing the curriculum based on a predetermined methodology in terms of quality management;
- content, curriculum load, the total number of credits and their breakdown semesters of study;
- indication of vertical specialization, including curriculum subjects, and vertical and horizontal linkages between courses, the degree of inclusion of other subjects than specialized or interdisciplinary subjects, the relationship between theory and applications;
- scheduling;
- designing the discipline records for all forms of didactic activity: lectures, seminars, tutorials, projects, etc. These documents contain information on: course objectives, basic content of the course/seminar/practical work, students' knowledge assessment methodology, teaching methodologies and technologies used in knowledge transfer, minimal bibliography, and the used informational technology infrastructure.
- the forms of student assessment knowledge, with consideration of assessment methods, the frequency of assessment, evaluation standards, responsibility for conduct of the evaluation;
- the management of teaching on years of study, semesters, weeks, hours;
- identifying the human resources needed and available, respectively the teaching grades, academic title and specialization in the field of personnel involved in carrying out the educational activities, etc.;
- identifying the financial resources and assets required.

Based on these theoretical fundamentals, the SERI Department team designed the curriculum of Bachelor's degree RISE program form of modules, from the nature of interdisciplinary and also multidisciplinary field. In a graphic representation, (Fig. 1) these modules are confined in the area noted above, the curriculum knowing a qualitative trend

continued since 2003, when the specialization has received the authorization to operate temporarily until 2009 once with the accreditation of the program of study.



Fig. 1 The curriculum structure of the RISE specialization

The composition of modules (Table 1) was set to be respected the ARACIS standards for the RISE specialization, but also to respond effectively to the local and regional economic environment. Thus, the curriculum includes core modules (law, economics, history, European studies, political science and international relations), special (foreign languages and practical knowledge) and complementary (physical education).

Composition of modules in the curricula of Bachelor's degree program of International Relations and European Studies³ **Table 1**

MODULE	THE CURRICULA DISCIPLINES	MODULE	THE CURRICULA DISCIPLINES
Economy Communi- cation	Introduction in Economy World Economy Negotiation Techniques and International Communication Secretary and Managerial Assistance Public Relations Relational Marketing Media and Inter- cultural Dialogue in the New EU	Political Sciences	Introduction in Political Sciences The Analyze of International Conflicts Geo-strategy and Geo- politics The Romania's 20 th Century Politics and Diplomacy
Law Cross-border Cooperation	Introduction in Law International Law Communitarian Law	International relations	Introduction in International Relations The Theory of International Relations The History of International Relations, the 17 th -19 th Centuries The History of International Relations, the 20 th Century The Sociology of International Relations International Institutions and Organizations
History Culture Society	The History of Political Ideas Introduction in Anthropology Culture and Society in the 17 th – 19 th Century Inter-cultural Dialogue European Demography Collective Mentalities	Foreign Language Knowledge	English French German Italian Spanish
European Studies	European Identity European Idea European Construction European Institutions	Practical Knowledge	Elements of Quality Evaluation Projects' Management Management of Financial- Banking Activities Public Management and Governing Logistic, Active and Transport Management Human Resources Management Informatics Web design, Multimedia

³ The data were collected from the curricula of the RISE specialization, see www.igri.ro, the official web site of the Faculty of History, Geography and International Relation, <http://www.igri.ro/ro/download?func=fileinfo&id=151> accessed on 19.07.2010

The first module has two components: economy and communication, grouped due to scientific concerns of the SERI Department. Their research activities in the Jean Monnet Module Media and Intercultural Dialogue in Europe Without Borders led to the introduction in the curricula of the courses Media and Intercultural Dialogue and intercultural dialogue in the new EU, training of specialists in the field of regional studies, which have the capability of understanding and communication with people from different cultures, can lead and manage international teams, have skills of relationship management and media partners in the European regional being pursued then by the masters program in regional development and EU institutional communication.

The Law module consists of three basic subjects listed in Table 1, cross-border cooperation component is being mentioned, especially in the masters program due to the subjects as Cross-border Law, Cross-border Cooperation, European Legislation on Cross-Border Cooperation and European Neighborhood Policy and Cross-Border Cooperation.

Another feature of this curriculum is the last two modules. The competence of the foreign languages module was thus established that the five foreign languages to be studied for three academic years by level of linguistic competence, in order to shape and develop communication skills in the public sphere, international relations, business and training and vocabulary development in IT. The students' knowledge has been supplemented with elements of British culture and civilization, namely French, Spanish, Italian, German, being continued into the master cycle with elements of diplomacy. The practical knowledge module was created to broaden the scope of competence of students in RISE, emphasizing in the last period by the economic - social environment the quality management and project management of European funding. The regional and Euro-regional character of the geographical positioning of Oradea, led to the filling of the practical module with knowledge in the field of public management and governance, financial - banking activities and human resources. The existence a strong company subsidiaries of Deutsche Telekom in Debrecen was a good reason for introducing in the curriculum of four semesters of training in IT.

2. Occupational Standards and National Qualifications Frameworks in Academic Education.

The pressure on state academic education institutions (public) to achieve the most competitive activities is increasingly high due to the emergence of new training market players - especially private universities and non-university organizations - which are not financed from state budget and are forced to perform an activity as more dynamic and efficient. In this context, a particularly important role in managing the quality of academic education in Romania goes to the different categories of standards used as referential for "what is" and / or "how to" in each university included in the national quality assurance system. Between them, the category of interest, in terms of our scientific approach, is that of occupational standards (Drăgulănescu, 2008: 3).

Occupational standards - known worldwide also as the standards of competence or qualification standards - defining the skills needed for effective implementation of specific activities of certain occupations (regardless of level - basic, secondary / middle, upper, etc.. In which training was conducted). They serve as referential in assessing a person's competence as providers of training in various training programs and by employers, thus providing the much needed link between education and business sector (Drăgulănescu, 2008: 7).

Occupational standards apply equally to all persons who practice a given occupation, regardless of their level of experience, competence representing the ability to

apply, transfer and combine knowledge and skills in different work situations and environments to achieve the required activities at work, the quality level specified in the occupational standard. Therefore, to be competent in an occupation supposes to possess and apply specialty knowledge, to analyze and determine decisions, to refer to creative tasks first, to work in teams, communicate effectively and efficiently, adapt to specific working environment and handle the unforeseen circumstances.

In this context, the National Qualifications Framework which will include all qualifications recognized officially in Romania is actually an occupational standard. In turn, the National Qualifications Framework for Academic Education, part of the National Qualifications Framework, aims primarily to establish national standards for learning outcomes in terms of knowledge, skills and competencies (*ACPART Strategy for developing national qualifications framework in academic education 2007/2009*).

3. Defining competencies for the RISE Bachelor's degree program

The descriptors on which they could then build the skills of graduates of International Relations and European Studies (Table 2) have specialists who participated in drafting the *Law 288/2004 on the Organization of Academic Education Studies*, identification of two main categories of skills: general and specialized. The first category may be divided into two subcategories: knowledge skills, functional - act.

Descriptors for the skills program International Relations and European Studies⁴

Table 2

CATEGORIES OF COMPETENCES		DESCRIPTORS
General competences	Knowledge competences	Knowledge, understanding and use of domain specific language appropriate for communication studies
		Ability to explain and interpret processes events, conditions, theories/ideas and trends studies falling within
	Functional-act competences	Application and transfer of technical-conceptual skills, and problem solving in the field of study
		Critical reflection and evaluation capacity of the concrete situations under value judgments form
Specialty competences	Specialty knowledge	Requirements on knowledge and understanding of reproductive processes
		Specific cognitive abilities
		Professional skills

In accordance with these descriptors, the staff of the SERI Department, based upon the curriculum for undergraduate study program RISE, identified the following key skills (<http://www.igri.ro/images/stories/pliant%204.jpg>):

⁴ The data were taken from the *Law 288/2004 on the Organization of Academic Education Studies*

1. General Competences:

1.1. Knowledge Competences:

- Communication skills in international relations and European studies in at least two foreign languages
- knowledge the foundations of theories of international relations and European construction process
- acquiring the knowledge of the common heritage of culture and civilization, by understanding the central and eastern European tradition as part of common European history and knowledge of Romanian contribution to European Heritage
- interpersonal and public communication skills at a higher-level and intercultural mediation
- ability to interpret dynamic international environment and to exploit results
- ability to link similar problems in different cultures

1.2. Functional – action competences:

- Ability to use the information technology in order to develop argumentative tests specific to the international relations and European studies and offer appropriate solutions for solving the problems
- ability to edit documents and reports specific to international relations

2. Specialty competences:

- Understanding the assumptions and components of the European project and a relevant understanding of the European institutional development
- ability to take economic and legal components of European studies and international relations, in the field of national and European cooperation
- the ability to manage the informational flow between different levels of institutions (academic, political, governmental, non-governmental, media or business, and private institutions) and the European ones or institutions specializing in international relations in Europe and in the world
- the ability of a qualified management of information between Romanian and foreign structures in the field of the European integration of Romania, in the European funding programs domain.
- the ability to understand the development of the international system from antiquity to the present, as well as actors, mechanisms and processes of contemporary international relations.
- organization of fairs, exhibitions and national and international conferences
- managing the relations with international business partners (customers, suppliers)
- using the multimedia tools for web design and highlighting the economic and human potential of an economic agent (national, multinational or transnational)
- higher managerial assistance
- using the elements of logistics for a company of intern or international transport
- manage the quality assurance issues

The number of acquired skills after graduating the International Relations and European Studies specialization, inside the University of Oradea is much higher, those previously mentioned as representative in the context of the theme of our research.

4. Conclusions

The intangible products offered by universities on the market are knowledge and skills in various forms such as: training of specialists in various specific areas (through education, training, training, etc..) Research, design consultancy, expertise, academic community members involved in various aspects of social life, etc. (Teodorescu, 2009: 220).

An important tool that provides the fundamentals necessary for strategic planning of education and training, responding to labor market needs, structuring opportunities for people to enter and advance in the labor market is the occupational standards. Their structure⁵ facilitates and allows the modularization of university training programs, thereby ensuring their flexibility, which is found and where the curriculum program Undergraduate International Relations and European Studies.

The title and the Bachelor's Degree are assigned to a graduate program of studies demonstrating the accumulation of knowledge and ability to understand aspects of the study area in which he was formed after completion of undergraduate studies, including current issues in the field. He can use both knowledge and his ability to understand phenomena through a professional approach in business and acquired the necessary skills demonstrating reasoning and problem solving in the field of study considered. Finally, the graduate's ability to collect and interpret relevant information and to develop judgments which may include reflections on social, ethical and scientific importance and ability to communicate information, ideas, problems and solutions, both in interaction with professionals and non-professionals (Atanasiu, 2005: 3).

From the data presented above, one can say that the skills and competencies identified for International Relations and European Studies Program respect the national indicators mentioned the above. At European level, for field analysis, the process of finalization of these indicators was completed in 2005 by a team of researchers from the University of Deusto and University of Groningen. Among the skills descriptors for the first cycle of university studies, scientists from the two universities were noted: work in an interdisciplinary area, communicate orally and an international language using the appropriate terminology, show understanding of the multi-disciplinarity of the area and the connections between its disciplines, demonstrate understanding of ideas and concept of Europe and European integration, demonstrate understanding of European institutions and decision making processes (Gonzalez, Wagenaar, 2005: 96). According to these descriptors the team of researchers was able to determine skills and competencies for the European Studies graduate, noting that they do not differ greatly from country to country within the European Union (*Idem*, p. 334).

Of the 28 identified skills and competencies important for our approaches are:

- ability to comment on or annotate documents appropriately in relation to critical issues in European Studies;
- ability to communicate orally in foreign language using the appropriate terminology in this subject area;
- ability to communicate orally in one's own language using the appropriate terminology;

⁵ An occupational standard includes: unit of competences - major activities, specific, independent, detailed description of each unit, related competence elements - showing the structure of the major key actions, performance criteria - indicating landmarks associated to the qualitative results of the actions of elements jurisdiction (including attitudes and behavior); range of variables - providing information on the range of contexts and conditions which take place the main activities and a guide for evaluation - giving information regarding the necessary profts to demonstrate the competence of a person inside each unit of competence

- ability to define suitable research topics contributing to debates on European integration;
- ability to work in a multicultural team;
- ability to work on a interdisciplinary area
- ability to interpret European events, development and policies in national, regional and local frameworks;
- awareness of the complexity of the EU enlargement and integration processes;
- awareness of the complexity of the process of wider European Co-operation;
- awareness of and respect for points of view deriving from different European and non-European national and cultural backgrounds;
- knowledge of business studies, economics, European cultures, geography, history, international relations, law, philosophy, politics, sociology and demography;
- knowledge of the history of ideas of Europe and European integration;
- knowledge of EU institutions and decision – making processes;
- knowledge of the national, regional and local impact of the integration process in Europe.

Comparing the two sets of skills, the European one and that established by the SERI Department of Oradea, one can see many similarities in their definition, the one in Oradea having in addition the component of international relations. Therefore we can say that from this point of view the established set of skills for undergraduate study program International Relations and European Studies at the University of Oradea it is framed within the European requirements, their own elaboration process is also one similar to that conducted in EU countries.

Another "verification" of competences established by the team of Oradea, which we proposed at the beginning of the study, is compatible with the requirements of the local economic, national, regional or European environment. Relevant in this regard are the skills required for employment European officials. They were presented by Steven Joseph, head of Task Office of the EU, in the work of the international conference curriculum Exchanging Experiences and Teaching Methods held in Rome on July 2, 2010 and are grouped into three dimensions of performance: personal characteristics and cognitive abilities, technical expertise (knowledge and skills) and behavioural competencies (how I do my job). The key indicators set by Steven Joseph, the number seven to which he added a further competency applies to AD5 and ADL grades, are: analysis and problem solving, communicating, delivering quality and results, learning and development, prioritising and organising, resilience, working with others and leadership (official site of SENT NETWORK). According to these descriptors, the skills required for employment as a European official are:

- identifies the critical facts in complex issues and develops creative and practical solutions;
- communicates clearly and precisely both orally and in writing;
- takes personal responsibility and initiative for delivering work to a high standard of quality within set procedures;
- develops and improves personal skills and knowledge of the organisation and its environment;
- prioritises the most important tasks, works flexibly and organises own workload efficiently;
- remains effective under a heavy workload, handles organisational frustrations positively and adapts to a changing work environment;

- works co-operatively with others in teams and across organisational boundaries and respects differences between people;
- manages, develops and motivates people to achieve results.

A simple scroll of the two data sets (the requirements for employment as a European official and skills acquired by attending the program of undergraduate International Relations and European Studies, University of Oradea) is sufficient to observe that the abilities and skills offered by the analyzed program of studies successfully correspond to the requirements of European employers.

In conclusion, in a society with a competitive market, to keep you on the market and to be prosperous, it must be competitive, that means to satisfy the customer's requests, to report yourself to the highest standards and to produce quality. The educational component is no exception to the need for quality, especially the academic education, preparing future generations of specialists able to cope with multiple demands of contemporary society, depends largely on the quality of supply and educational benefit of university education environment (Teodorescu, 2009: 220). In this context, the process of defining skills of the Bachelor's degree graduates has an important role in determining the quality of the educational offer. Even if this process is still in its infancy in Romania, important steps have been taken for developing the National Qualifications Framework. In turn, the National Qualifications Framework for academic education must be aligned to the requirements of national occupational standards and even European. Therefore, the effort of the SERI staff from the Department of Oradea is an example of good practice in what concerns the combining of the ARACIS standards with the requirements of the local and regional economic environment. The outcome approach is the transmission of a piece of knowledge and skills which results in a set of skills and competencies consistent with the highest European standards. Also, the whole process of determining these competences is an approach for improving the quality of university programs.

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