

The curriculum in higher education challenged

Aim

Our 21st century society faces a large number of challenges in social, cultural, economic, demographic and technological fields. The VLOR wants to look at the implications for curriculum design in higher education with its project called 'The curriculum in higher education challenged'. This project is funded through the Erasmus+ programme, KA3-Support to Policy Reform, Support to the implementation of EHEA reforms 2016 - 2018.

This project has a threefold intention: 1. raising awareness of the critical role curriculum design and delivery plays in the changing higher education landscape; 2. obtaining modernised curricula designed and delivered in such a way that all graduates, upon completion, have acquired the abilities and capabilities for work and life in a complex and rapidly changing world; 3. developing more collaborative partnerships and exchanges of knowledge, experience and innovative practices at the national and international level with regard to curriculum design and delivery.

In order to develop a vision on the above-mentioned matter, the VLOR organises four activities. The first activity was a workshop on 2 May 2017 with experts in the field of curriculum design and delivery. On 16 and 17 November 2017, the VLOR organised a peer learning activity (PLA) involving the target groups of the Flemish higher education system and international peers from ministries and HEIs. The aim of the PLA was to exchange knowledge, experience, practices and new approaches with regard to curriculum design and delivery. As the VLOR steering group noticed that the Southern European countries were less involved in the PLA, an additional PLA took place in Rome on 8 and 9 March 2018. Finally, the VLOR will organise a dissemination conference on 18 April 2018 involving the whole Flemish higher education community.

Discussion paper

In order to give graduates the appropriate skills enabling them to participate actively and meaningfully while helping to shape a rapidly evolving society, increasing demands are being placed on the curriculum. Higher education is increasingly expected to strengthen internationalisation, innovation, employability, citizenship, democracy, sustainability, social commitment, interdisciplinarity... One way or another, these elements should be translated into the curriculum. How can institutions deal with this?

The key question above was the starting point of a discussion paper produced by a VLOR steering group in the spring of 2017. The paper assesses the situation in Flanders, deals with what a curriculum is or can be and addresses the challenges of curriculum design in higher education. This paper was finalised by the steering group in preparation of its dissemination in April 2018.

Questions

The discussion paper leads to a non-exhaustive list of 10 questions to foster discussion in the PLA.

1. How can a curriculum respond to today's societal needs?
2. How can a curriculum stimulate student involvement?
3. How can a curriculum do the above in an integrated way?
4. Is the curriculum the only instrument for this?

5. What is the relationship between the learning outcomes and the curriculum, and is it sufficiently clear?
6. How do we know if the curriculum is doing what is intended?
7. How powerful is the curriculum?
8. Does an institution have sufficient space to devise the curriculum of a particular programme?
9. How can teachers and staff be professionalised?
10. What is the role of the stakeholders in curriculum (re)design? Who owns the curriculum?

Programme PLA Rome

Thursday 8 March

12:00 Opening meeting with lunch

Participants: the Flemish delegation and the representatives from the different Rome Tor Vergata Schools, The Vice Rector and the Quality Education Evaluation group

- Presentation of the project “The Curriculum in Higher Education Challenged”
- Presentation of the Rome Tor Vergata approach to curriculum design

14:30 Meeting with an innovative course (MSc Business Administration)

Participants: the Flemish delegation and the director & programme office of the program

16:00 Campus tour

Conference dinner

Friday 9 March

09:30 Meeting with an innovative course (Skype meeting with Amaya Mendikoetxea, Universidad Autónoma de Madrid)

Participants: the Flemish delegation and the director & program office of the program

11:00 Meeting with an innovative course (Bachelor in Global Governance)

Participants: the Flemish delegation and the director & program office of the program

12:00 Closing meeting

Participants: the Flemish delegation and the representatives from the School of Economics.

13:00 Closing lunch

14:00 End of the PLA

Presentation of the project “The Curriculum in Higher Education Challenged”

The Tor Vergata University team led by professor Corrado Cerutti welcomes the Flemish delegation warmly. The chairman of the project, professor Cis Van den Bogaert thanks the Tor Vergata team for hosting this PLA. Subsequently, Cis Van den Bogaert presents the current status of the project “The Curriculum in Higher Education Challenged”.

Presentation of the Rome Tor Vergata approach to curriculum design

Curriculum design and accreditation: The experience of Rome “Tor Vergata” University

By Professor Giovanni Barillari, Vice Rector for Teaching

Professor Barillari explains how to design a degree programme in Italy, the accreditation path and the Tor Vergata strategic objectives concerning teaching performance. According to the regulations of the Italian Ministry for Education, University and Research (MIUR), 4 steps has to be taken to design an new programme: Step 1: Define the overall picture; Step 2: Make a survey; Step 3: Verify the sustainability; Step 4: Prepare for the start of the course. ¹

When the programme is designed, the initial accreditation procedure starts. Professor Barillari explains that initial accreditation will be obtained if **five key requisites** are taken into account: ²

1. transparency of the programme
2. teaching staff (in relation to the amount of students)
3. diversification of courses
4. structural resources (in line with the number of students and the course objectives)
5. the quality has to be assured (according to ANVUR³ guidelines)

¹ First of all, the educational objective of the programme has to be specified together with the type of programme (Bachelor / Master). Each programme belongs to a certain class, that is defined by the ministry. This is especially the case for bachelor programmes. In creating master programmes, institutions have more freedom. The ministry defines some mandatory courses that have to be present depending on the class of the programme. Institutions are free to award the amount of credits to a mandatory courses.

As a second step, the institution has to depict the proficiencies that an incoming student must have. For some programmes (such as medicine) the requirements are strict, including national determined exams. The institution has to delineate the expected learning outcomes according to Dublin’s treaty. The institutions also have to define the type of jobs eventually obtainable after graduation. Finally a report has to be made of the consultations with professionals, business companies, industries, etc. which are related to the educational objective of the degree course.

Thirdly, the sustainability of the proposed programme has to be verified in relation to the number and expertise of teaching and administrative staff. Even so the suitability of the didactic structures (classrooms, laboratories, etc.) is taken into account. According to the obtained data, the maximum number of incoming students are determined.

As a fourth and final step, the institution collects information for incoming students. The institution also establishes a committee (composed by professors, administrative staff and students) which will supervise the quality of the educational processes.

² When a department agrees to organize a new programme, the Vice Rector of Education checks if this kind of programme is not in competition with the other schools (faculties) in the university or other universities in the area. An internal quality assurance committee checks if the new course meets all requirements of the Italian law. Finally, the senatus academicus, which is a commission of academics and the Board of directors have to give their agreement. The latter will also check the financial aspects of the programme.

The next step is a meeting with other universities in the region. Each university has to present the new programmes they want to organise. After their approval, the CUN, the council of all Italian universities approves the programme. Subsequently, the institution sends the programme proposal to the Italian Ministry of Education for final (motivated) approval.

After running a programme for five years there is a quality check⁴. This quality check is done every three years. This check focusses on the **level of quality; efficiency and efficacy and Economic and financial sustainability**. Every five years an ANVUR peer review panel including a student assesses all programmes.

Tor Vergata strategic objectives as to teaching⁵ are increasing the performance of the programme as to **attractiveness, internationalization** (students with at least 12 credits earned abroad), **teaching sustainability** (services to students) and **effectiveness** (related to employability, focus on master degrees)⁶.

Meeting with an innovative course (MSc Business Administration)

By professor Corradu Cerutti, programme director MSc Business Administration

The Master of Science in Business Administration at the University of Rome Tor Vergata is a two years programme of its School of Economics. In the first year rather classical teaching and learning methods are used. In the second year experts from outside the university are involved such as professionals from companies. In this second year, students have to choose between seven specialisations. In 2019 - 2020 the programme will be revised.

The programme director mentions that he organises ad hoc **seminars** to teach students hands-on in order to foster their competitiveness and knowledge. In these ad hoc seminars taught by professionals, the students do not receive a mark but just pass or fail. Attendance of the seminars is compulsory.

A lot of students end up working as management consultants. Therefore, the university created a path in **attracting the consultants of the working market in the programme**. The programme has many contacts in all big consulting companies. Therefore, there are in the programme some practice based courses such as 'Supply chain risk management', an international trade seminar and 'Business Intelligence and data mining based on SAS'. Every graduate will have at least a minimal knowledge of SAS. For them, the programme grants **certifications** (of SAS) that are used worldwide. Even so, the programme has a **placement service**, thanks to its vast international network. This enables students to get a first work experience.

The best students are involved in a **national implementation project**. Last year this project was on 'waste management in municipalities': a blue print was designed by students together with an SAP-consultant. This allows the students to gain experience in the competitive world of business.

120 students are enrolled in the programme. Amongst them there are 50 **international students** from China, South-America and from European countries. Before enrolling, students undergo a selection procedure. It is the programme director's impression that in general the students mix rather well with each other. Therewithal, the university organises events for international students such as dinners where everyone can bring its own local food. The MBA also has a **double degree programme** with Beijing Capital University of Economics and Business. Every year they exchange five students each.

³ ANVUR is National Agency for the Evaluation of Universities and Research Institutes.

⁴ **QUALITY: Coherent contents** of the programme with the contemporary **cultural needs**; Verification of **specific objectives** proposed by the programme and their agreement with the **strategic objectives** of the University; Adequate **human and structural resources**; Fulfilment of the quality **evaluation processes**

EFFICIENCY AND EFFICACY: Evaluated using **indicators** related to **students careers**, graduated **satisfaction** and **professional activity**.

ECONOMIC AND FINANCIAL SUSTAINABILITY: Evaluated using **indicators** related to: **number and origin of students enrolled** to the degree programme and to **number and characteristics of the teaching staff**; to be compared with the general university expenses.

⁵ www.pqa.uniroma2.it

⁶ One of the 'innovative' programmes mentioned by the Vice Rector is a master programme in Art History in Rome. The programme works together with historical sites and museums where students can practice their competencies

Campus tour

Professor Corrado Cerutti invites the Flemish delegation for a campus tour including a visit to the facilities of the School of Economics.

Meeting with an innovative course

Skype meeting with Amaya Mendikoetxea, vice chancellor internationalisation, Universidad Autónoma de Madrid (UAM)

In her presentation Amaya Mendikoetxea focuses on joint programmes, the UAM Experience and the YERUN experience.

Joint programmes

Amaya Mendikoetxea states that in the last decade, there has been a **great impetus towards joint programmes**. It became one of the pillars of the EHEA, together with a common degree structure, the adaptation of ECTS credits and a common quality assessment framework. Joint programmes foster students' European identity and enhance their employability. Member states are committed to remove legal obstacles at national level for the establishment and recognition of degrees in joint programme degrees. Higher education institutions are also encouraged to set up these programmes and enhance the mobility of students and staff.

Joint programmes are the result of two or more institutions joining forces to contribute their academic resources and traditions **with the objective of improving the quality of the teaching and research** in the particular subject area covered. **A joint programme should be a programme of a higher academic standard than each of the participating institutions would achieve separately.**

The added value of joint programmes are:

- enhancing employability and offering students access to programmes that can lead to professional accreditation in their field
- developing innovative international education curricula and mobility experiences for students
- improving the quality of courses by exposing them to challenging international standards both as to contents and as to teaching models
- complementarity: courses not offered by one institution alone and which complement partners' curricula
- retraining high-potential home students who target to have study experience abroad
- attracting international students and promoting multiculturalism and multilingualism
- providing a structured mobility experience for students
- enhancing the European identity by being fully exposed to different higher education systems
- international visibility and reputation
- internationalisation of staff (teaching and administrative staff)
- establishing close links leading to collaboration in other areas (research), for instance spinoffs that appear
- strengthening links with partner institutions

The UAM experience

The UAM is a 50 years old public university with 69 departments and 8 faculties. They have 33000 students in their 53 undergraduate programmes and 114 master programmes. They have six double degrees on bachelor level⁷ and two double degrees on both bachelor and master level.

The key words in the collaboration between partner universities are the four Spanish C's: conocimiento, confianza, compromiso, calidad. This means mutual **knowledge, trust, commitment and quality**. An important condition is also the **reputation of the partner** (as an indicator of quality). Also **compatibility and complementarity** of the curriculum (specialisations are not available at UAM) are important aspect

⁷ In Spain a bachelor has 240 ECTS.

when looking for partnerships. The latter can be both on the content level as on the level of learning methods.

The YERUN experience

Yerun, the organization of Young European Research Universities, is an association of 18 European universities from 12 different countries which figure among the top 50 university rankings. This association was founded in Brussels in 2015. In the Yerun strategic plan 2016 - 2020 they focus on knowledge exchange regarding: 1. Influencing EU policy, 2. Research collaboration, 3. Graduate employability; 4. Education collaboration.

YERUN defined five **different types of internationalisation**: Study abroad, Exchange, Joint programmes: certificate programmes, Joint programmes: double or multiple degrees and Joint programmes: joint degrees. Therefore, a working group has been established with three main tasks:

1. mapping of existing exchanges in the network
2. mapping joint programmes in the network
3. mapping of Erasmus+ KA2 projects in the network.

Currently, the network has more than 130 joint programmes, most of them are double degrees on master level. Making joint programmes on master level seems to be more flexible than on bachelor level. Most of these degrees are in social sciences, Amaya Mendikoetxea explains.

The **aims of the working group** are:

1. raising awareness of the opportunities of joint programmes
2. promoting and encouraging the setting up of such programmes
3. defining guidelines for double degrees and other joint programmes
4. elaborating a set of quality assurance tools
5. develop, monitor and ensure quality standards of such programmes.

Nine universities showed interest in establishing new joint programmes with other YERUN partners. When the members will know each other better it will be easier to set up actions including also joint programmes together at the doctoral level, Amaya Mendikoetxea argues. From this point of view UAM will organise a staff training week on best practices for all YERUN partners.

Debate

After the presentation of Amaya, the Tor Vergata team and the Flemish delegation started a debate. Amaya Mendikoetxea elaborates that the learning experience and involvement of students is much higher in joint programmes than it is in an Erasmus exchange. The innovation in a joint programme is often created by the experience of studying abroad in a multicultural environment.

Asking how to organise a joint programme at UAM, Amaya Mendikoetxea answers that establishing joint programmes is not easy. Making joint programmes is very demanding because of administrative burden. A new joint degree, takes the national regulations of both institutions into account. The stronger a network of institutions becomes, the easier it will be to make joint programmes. This is because partners will have more experience and also more trust in each other. There is a future for networks like YERUN to enhance the possibility for programmes to work together, Amaya Mendikoetxea concludes.⁸

⁸ As a final good example, she mentions the creation of a joint degree in philosophy, law and economics between two Madrid and two Barcelona universities. Students are mobile between the different universities. This has been a very interesting experience to establish this, even though this was a joint degree in one country.

Meeting with an innovative course (Bachelor in Global Governance)

By professor Gustavo Piga, Programme director Bachelor in Global Governance

The bachelor in Global Governance is the only both liberal arts and science programme in Italy. The programme is a social sciences programme organised by the School of Economics. Nevertheless all six schools of Tor Vergata University are contributing to this programme. At the beginning of the programme only four students were enrolled. After running the programme for five years, the programme receives now 500 applications of which 60 students can enroll in the programme. The programme director considers the limited enrollments as one of the major reasons of success. A **good selection process** enables to **identify the ambitions of the students** and it creates the possibility to work with all students **on the personal level**.

The Bachelor in Global Governance wants to be a programme studying globalisation. The programme director describes it as 'something that happens far away, but that you want to be solved': e.g. Ebola. In this particular case, the programme management invited the head of an Ebola mission in Africa to learn how to deal with Ebola. This man explained to the students that to operate in those regions, one needs more than only medical logic. One has to deal with local norms and values for instance concerning dealing with dead bodies.

The three **aims of the programme** are 1. sharpening critical thinking; 2. confronting diversity; 3. personal growth of the student. The programme's **multidisciplinarity** sharpens the critical thinking of both students and teachers. The programme director stresses the importance of **dedication of the teaching staff**. Regularly, the programme brings together all teaching staff to discuss the programme and its goals.⁹

The programme **takes the students abroad** e.g. Gdansk for a course on economic history. Even so, the programme **invites the representatives** of other programmes of other institutions in Italy and abroad. The programme director considers the **alumni** as the ambassadors of the programme.

The students agree with the programme director teaching staff listens to the students about what has to be done. This is seen as a part of a strong feedback culture. 2nd year students are **guiding the first year students**: every second year student guides a 1st year student. This is useful in getting to know each other. As this programme is a bachelor programme, students are very young. This makes them very **open to new experiences**. The students are ambitious and most of them will study a master programme in Italy or abroad. The teaching staff helps the students in their choice and their applications to the master programmes.

After the presentation by the programme director and the students, there is a debate with the Flemish delegation. This debate showed that teaching and learning methods are still rather classic in Italy. Problem based Learning is not that widely spread in Italy. The challenge is to bring this into the curricula. The programme director emphasises that the project of VLOR and its paper will foster the debate in the programme about 21st century skills.

⁹ At the end of the year, all students have to give their opinion about the teaching staff and courses. The programme director admits that he takes 50% of the suggestions and complaints of students into account. For instance: a teacher that does not yet speak English very well, but great specific skills and the opportunity to improve its language skills, will remain teacher in the programme despite complaints from students.

Closing meeting

To conclude the PLA, the participants formulated some lessons learned.

- engage students in the design of new curricula
- reduce administrative burden
- recognise student engagement as a very important aspect of quality assurance
- strong networks make it easier to establish joint programmes
- interdisciplinarity is an essential aspect in innovative programmes

Comments by the observer

Patrick Van den Bosch from the Quality Assurance Unit of the Flemish Higher Education Council (VLUHR QA) acted as observer during this Peer Learning Activity In Rome. After the PLA, he organised in Rome a survey amongst the Flemish delegation. These results are used as input for the evaluation below.

Organisational

The PLA was organised by the VLOR. It took place in the Tor Vergata University in Rome. A Flemish delegation of 9 members of the VLOR Steering group met the Tor Vergata team. The representative from the UAM (Spain) attended some sessions by Skype. This combination of conversations on the spot and via Skype worked well both technically and in terms of content.

The PLA started on day 1 at noon and ended on day 2 at 2 pm. The participants were satisfied with the day schedule as well as the lunch, the dinner and the hotel facilities offered by the VLOR. All in all, the participants are enthusiastic about the organization of the PLA.

Content

All participants consider this additional PLA, as an added value to the November PLA. Previous insights were confirmed and many new insights were acquired. By visiting this university on the spot, the story of Tor Vergata University became much more tangible. Participants consider it of an added value that more than one university was involved in this PLA in Rome. This broadened the horizons.

A lesson learned from the previous PLA is that participants liked to have more time to discuss. In this PLA more time was provided to debate with each other. In particular, the participants appreciated that student delegates were present in both the Flemish delegation and the Tor Vergata University delegation. In this way, the student perspective was also included.

All in all, this peer learning activity can be considered - again - as very positive: all showed an overall positive satisfaction about the content of the PLA.