Development and Innovation of Curriculum in Foreign Language

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ABSTRACT

The primary aim of the Faculty of Humanities of the University of Žilina in Žilina is providing education of a very high quality. Its realization is evaluated not only by the Accreditation commission but also by the Slovak government advisory body which monitors, reviews and independently evaluates the quality of educational, research, development, artistic and other activities of Slovak Universities. The evaluation of Academic ranking and rating agency (ARRA) is based on publicly available and verifiable data concerning the quality of education and research of individual faculties in Slovakia. It is often a decisive criterion in the selection of the university where the students will be studying. The Faculty of Humanities was ranked first in the group of philosophical faculties in the 2012 ARRA evaluation in Slovakia and its aim has become a continuous, high-quality training of students in order to improve their labour market success. To reach the mentioned aim the faculty participates in various projects concentrating on the development and innovation of curriculum with emphasis on the needs of the labour market and knowledge society. As intercultural communication is nowadays one of the key priorities and important pre-conditions for the processes of globalization, our project team has decided to prepare accreditation documents for the study programme *Intercultural communication* focusing on comparison of socio-cultural dimensions of English speaking countries with the national peculiarities of Slovakia.

Keywords: knowledge society, education, accreditation, inner system of quality of education, study programme

INTRODUCTION

Education is understood as a complex of knowledge, cognitive competence and abilities that are obtained by an individual on the basis of his/her school education, learning, intellectual education, life and work experience and intentional self-education. It is necessary to realize that education is not an exact science. Level of education is a basic support and spine of the civilisation existence. It generates culture. It is an ability to share reliably a cultural context [1]. Education is "goods", but also the highest spiritual value. The contemporary university oscillates between the requirement of massification of education and ambition of top quality. Slovak higher education has already undergone a lot of changes but a radical turning point for it was signing of Bologna declaration (by the ministers in charge of higher education from 29 European countries on 19 June, 1999 in Bologna). The collocation "Bologna process" (whose aim is to create the European Higher Education Area), is for several years one of the most declined expressions in an academic community [2]. It represents a reform which changes the face of the European university world.

Comparable quality assurance of individual European countries in higher education aimed at students is another important task outlined in Bologna declaration [3]. Universities need to

offer study programmes of a very high quality to reach this aim. Quality assurance of study programmes should include:

- o Preparation and publication of explicit educational results,
- o Regular evaluation of study programmes,
- o Regular feedback from employers and
- o Involvement of students in quality assurance activities.

The tool for work at internal and external quality assurance is *Learning chain* (Fig.1) [4].
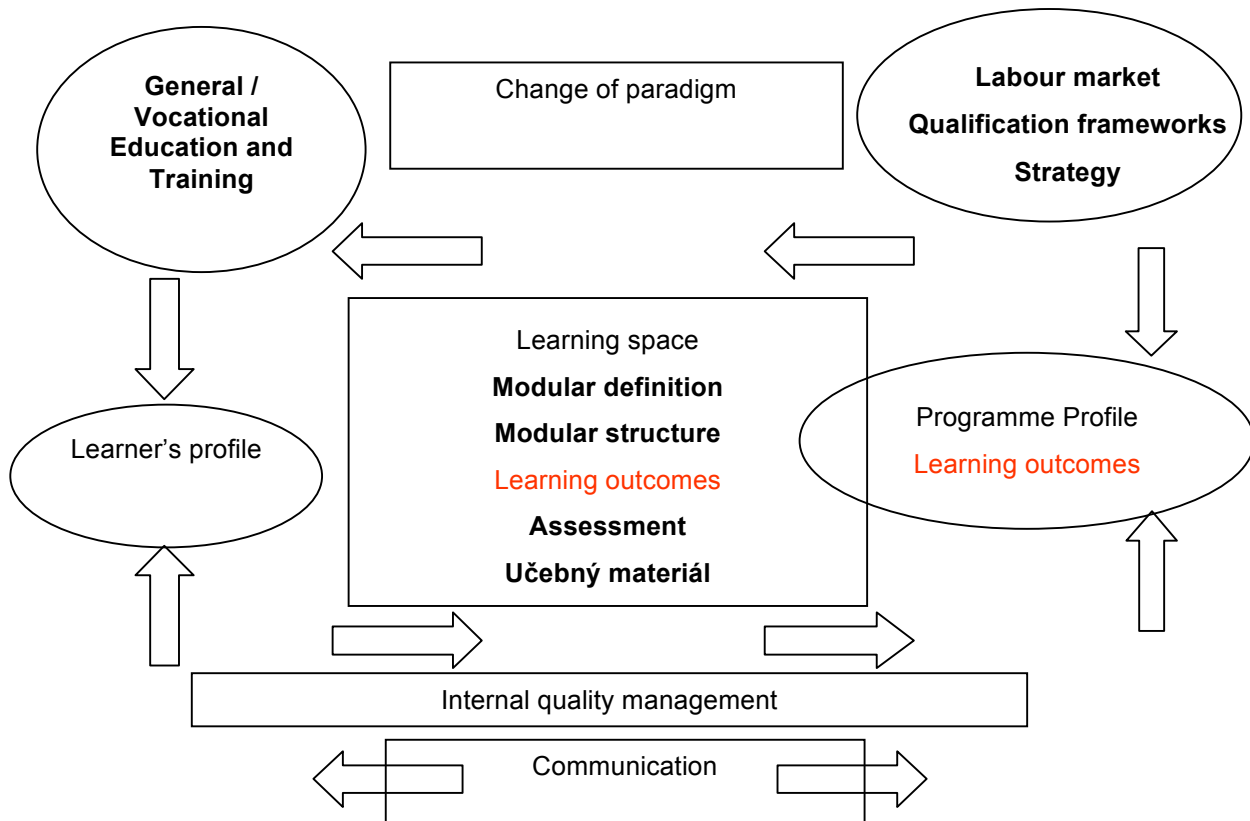

Fig. 1 Learning chain

The main parts of the educational process are:

Process of creation and approval of a study programme:
- o analysis of market demands and capacity possibilities of an educational institution,
- o initiation and creation of a study programme (guarantee),
- o preparation of a study programme (courses, lecturers),
- o approval of a study programme,

A process of giving information about the study programme,
- o preparation of its promotion,
- o publication of information,
- o providing detailed information – communication with an applicant

Process of student admission,
- o ensuring university application availability and acceptance of the completed application,
- o invitation to the entrance exams,

- o implementation of the entrance exams/evaluation of the results,
- o notification of the entrance exams results,
- o admission/enrolment of a student for study

A process of formation of the student's own specialization,
- o providing information on the system of specialization formation,
- o providing information on the courses and activities offer,
- o selection and enrolment for courses,

A process of making requirements for an educational activity and allocation of teaching resources,
- o providing a detailed description of the educational activity (syllabus and study resources),
- o giving information on the conditions of successful completion of an educational activity,
- o ensuring and releasing requirements for an educational process (schedule of courses, allocated space and didactic aids),

A process of knowledge mediation (implementation of educational activities),
- o knowledge mediation by lecturing/conducting seminars and labs,
- o releasing study materials (e-education),
- o supportive activity for knowledge mediation (consultations, practice, thesis supervision),

A process of students' knowledge assessment (exams, evaluation of essays/works),
- o releasing dates of knowledge assessment,
- o register for an exam/handing in essays,
- o testing/assessment performance,
- o reporting and recording results of students' knowledge assessment,

A process of studies completion,
- o releasing information on conditions for completion of studies/form of study,
- o acceptance of additional materials from students,
- o evaluation of the conditions fulfilment,
- o familiarizing with the assessment of the conditions fulfilment and issuance of a certificate and
- o communication and keeping relationships with the university graduates [5].

This process implementation should be shared by all involved sides – students, their parents, secondary schools, employers, employees, managers, teachers and administration staff of the university, accreditation commission, partner schools, town and region (public) [6].

Accreditation of Study Programmes
The word *accreditation* has several meanings. It is impartial and independent assessment and certification made by the accreditation authority and referring to the subject competency to perform the activities specified in the certificate and to meet consistently eligibility requirements prescribed in the corresponding obligatory document. Since accreditation is carried out independently and impartially, it is considered to be a main factor in the credibility and accuracy of the accredited subject's activity results. This is the reason why it is used for assessment and evaluation of all activities and the results of which the society expects a high degree of accuracy and confidence. Accreditation is service for a society and there is no reason for making a distinction between the accreditation applied in higher education and the accreditation applied in the voluntary sphere. [7]

In the high school environment, accreditation is a confirmation of fulfilling conditions of the required quality of education provided by a school (an educational institution). It is issued by the Minister of Education, Science, Research and Sport of the Slovak republic on the recommendation of the Accreditation commission. The commission evaluates educational programmes, conditions for their implementation and other factors which provide adequate guarantees of the higher education quality assurance.

Accreditation body, which is represented by the Accreditation commission, has to act as the third person. It means that its activities and decisions have to be impartial and without any external influence. At the same time there must be excluded conflicts of interests of the third persons acting in the accreditation process. Generally, all the members of Accreditation commission have to be qualified for this activity and their assessment and decision-making processes have to ensure an objective outcome of the capacity of the higher education institution to conduct the study programme. On the basis of this outcome and the predefined criteria a university will be authorised to grant its graduates academic degrees. [8]

Intercultural Communication
It is no doubt that providing high-quality education has always been the most important need not only for an individual but also for the whole society. Since 2013 University of Žilina in Žilina has been implementing an ESF project *Innovation and internationalization of education – Instruments to increase the quality of the University of Žilina in the European educational area* within The Operation programme: Education. The aim of the project is to support the quality of education at the university. One of its activities is the development of new study programmes and their accreditation documents for the 1st, 2nd and 3rd degrees of the higher education at the selected faculties of the University of Žilina in Žilina. High-quality education is also a primary aim of our faculty – the Faculty of Humanities of the University of Žilina in Žilina. For this reason we take part in the stated project – specifically in the activity: *Development and innovation of study programmes with the emphasis on the labour market needs.*

Innovation is generally understood as something new, modern, more interesting and challenging. It is introduced into the educational process with the aim to increase the attractiveness of the study at the university for its future students. Innovation is taken into consideration also during the process of preparation and development of accreditation documents for individual study programmes. The emphasis is put on introduction of new products whose prospects are connected with increase of globalisation and trends in the economic environment, enterprising and in companies themselves. For this reason we have set the aim to develop a new and modern programme which will be in accordance with the needs of a labour market and knowledge society. We are led by the requirements of intercultural communication that represent key priorities and important presuppositions of globalisation society-wide efforts in an integrated Europe. It is supposed that the study programme *Intercultural communication* will respond to a new social reality, especially to our position in European Union which is closely connected with intensification of international relations in all areas of social life.

Technical development enables continuous information and knowledge flow across countries. Current communication is faster than ever before. For work or study reasons there is also an increasing population migration which changes demographic features of many countries. Due to this process new intercultural identities and communities are created. Cultural diversity and multiculturalism together with the reality of working life also exist in our country and they

require from workers, who are in contact with foreigners, to have not only the knowledge of language but also intercultural competence. Formation the personality in education that will have the acquired level of intercultural competence becomes an actual aim of the educational process. It helps to understand:

o   What cultures have in common,
o   The diversity in languages as well as in constructing and organising knowledge and reality in which people live and communicate – this understanding has profound implications for the development of critical awareness of social relationships,
o   How people from different cultures communicate with one another,
o   The influence of culture on social behaviour (communication) not only in the personal and telephone contact but also in cybernetic space and mass media which are becoming more and more popular nowadays.

A three-year B.A. study programme *Intercultural communication* is conceptually intended to be a specific study with the focus on courses dealing with socio-cultural dimensions of English speaking countries in comparison with national peculiarities of Slovak republic. Nowadays the European labour market constantly requires language competence of people who will communicate in an intercultural world. The core competencies of the proposed study programme graduates will be interpersonal communication in an international context and overview of key aspects of international cooperation (e.g. economy, politics, culture, etc.). An appreciable contribution of this study programme will be also obtaining effective communication skills both in English and Slovak languages. Its aim is to convey crucial knowledge of a culture clash in different areas of human life and enable graduates to gain intercultural competence which will help them to be successful on the European labour market – in all areas of the social and political life.

When developing the study plan for the study programme *Intercultural communication* we took into consideration a description of the field of study 2.1.32 *Foreign languages and cultures* and the core of knowledge processed by MSVVaS SR. They are related to:

Theoretical knowledge:
o   intercultural communication,
o   linguistics,
o   literary science,
o   cultural studies,

Practical abilities and skills:
o   English language,
o   Slovak language,

Additional knowledge, abilities and skills :
o   translation and interpretation,
o   management basis,
o   culturology [9].

A compiled study plan includes 14 compulsory courses (Intercultural Communication, Multiculturalism in Social Practice, Language Culture and Rhetoric, British and American Studies, English Language, History of Slovak Literature, National Culture, Comparative Linguistics, Interpretation and Translation Seminars, A Course in Writing a Final Thesis and Final Thesis), 6 compulsory elective courses (Communication skills, Academic writing, Public relations, Business Correspondence, Interlanguage Dynamics and International Corporate Culture) and 2 elective courses (Foreign language and Physical education) which are evaluated

by 2-5 ECTS credits. The highest credit evaluation is assigned to the State Exam and Defence of the Final Thesis – 14 ECTS credits. To determine the number of credits for each completed course is not a simple task. We have to take into consideration that the assigned number of credits expresses the overall workload of the student by a specific course. Moreover, an emphasis is put on:

- o Comparison with the workload of the student by other courses,
- o Estimated position of the course in the student's study plan,
- o Possibilities for obtaining the prescribed number of credits in one semester,
- o The number of exams in one semester, and
- o Ensuring the course provision [10].

By attending and completing all compulsory courses students obtain a sufficiently deep theoretical basis and they subsequently have enough opportunities for its practical implementation during seminars. In each semester students also select one compulsory elective course. Each compulsory elective course can be chosen only once during the whole study. The list of these courses can be found in the study plan whose contents can be adapted if there is a need.

The study programme is completed by the state exam and the defence of the final thesis. If the student wants to take a final state examination, he/she is supposed to complete successfully all the prescribed contents of the study programme according to the study orders of the University of Žilina in Žilina and the Faculty of Humanities of the University of Žilina in Žilina and hand in a final thesis with all required particulars.

Final thesis writing and defending is the demonstration of the student's:

- o Ability to obtain and use theoretical and practical knowledge independently,
- o Ability to solve demanding tasks independently,
- o Ability to work creatively in his/her field of study,
- o Overview of some theoretical and practical knowledge and problems in his/her field of study, and
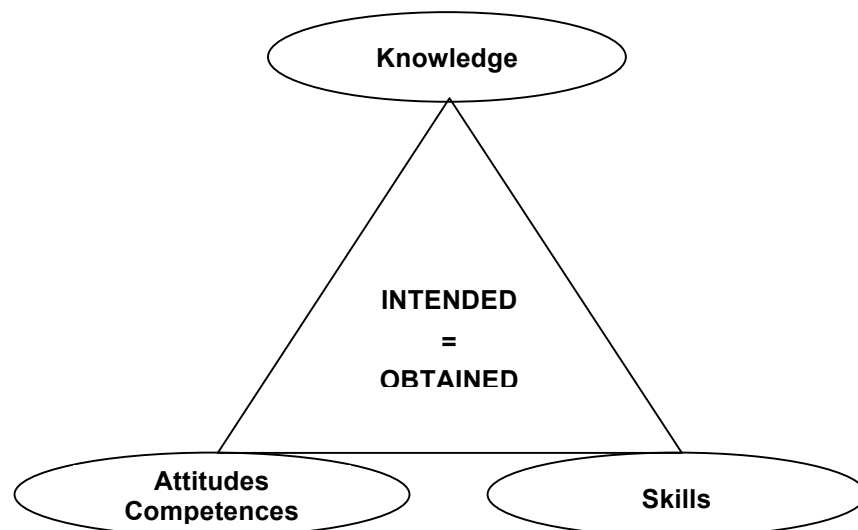- o Ability to explain and solve the problems independently.

Fig. 2: Learning Outcomes - Classification

Three-year B.A. studies will provide theoretical and practical education not only for the students who will use the acquired knowledge in their jobs but also for the students who will

be interested in applying for two-year Master studies in the stated or related field of study. The basic admission requirements for studies in the study programme *Intercultural communication* are established by Law No.131/2002 on Higher Education and on Changes and Supplements to Some Laws. Another criterion is admission either on the basis of entrance exams or *Maturita* exams results (results from Slovak and English language exams). In case of entrance exams the abilities of applicants are tested by a written test whose contents correspond to the level of knowledge obtained during the study at four- year secondary grammar schools. A knowledge test focused on literature and culture of English-speaking countries is a part of entrance exams, too. The aim of the exams is to check practical mastering Slovak and English language, knowledge on cultural, economic, political and social life of English speaking countries and ability to express own opinions and visions. Meeting these requirements will be evaluated by an examining board which is named and chaired by the dean of the faculty. In the admission process the secondary school study results of the applicant are taken into consideration, too.

The graduates of the study programme have many job opportunities in the European labour market due to the acquired language skills and knowledge reflecting multiculturalism of the contemporary society. They have also basic knowledge on translation strategies and techniques of simultaneous and consecutive interpretation, general culturological competence focusing on English speaking countries in a dynamic confrontation with the national culture and life and basic theoretical and methodological knowledge on linguistics and literary science. They can work as specialists who effectively combine a wide spectrum of knowledge from several fields of study – in international companies and organisations, public relations, diplomatic service, state service and local government – as EU officials, cultural educators, medial advisors, consultants, speakers, editors, commentators, presenters, analysts, managers, assistants, translators, interpreters and intercultural mediators. They are also prepared for studying in an M.A. study programme where their acquired knowledge from B.A. studies can be deepen and broaden.

Globalisation trends bringing changes like internationalisation of life and informatisation of society often bring communication problems [11]. These competencies and skills cannot be reduced only to elementary speech knowledge because they are often connected with norms and conventions, behaviour, interests, cultural or national awareness – with a socio-cultural dimension. This dimension has to become a necessary part of vocational education. People can effectively work and live in the multicultural environment only if they obtain competences for handling intercultural communication situations. Foreign language acquisition as well as acquisition of intercultural competence activates the European dimension of education. It includes not only diversified foreign language teaching but also education for intercultural tolerance and respect for universal human ethical values [12].

CONCLUSION

The possibilities of graduate career prospects are increasing thanks to education and training. An educational process represents a continuous process which is important for an individual as well as for the whole society on the way to satisfying their needs. As it represents the means of innovation, it is necessary to consider it responsibly [13]. Its added value – comparison of the values expressed by the level of education before entering the educational process and after its completion in terms of the success rate of utilization of acquired knowledge, skills and abilities – can be understood as an investment in human resources with high expected returns. The quality of an educational process is connected with both its results and effects. It depends also on the properly selected learning objectives, methods, forms and resources. Quality of education as a product is determined by assessment. Its underestimation in the sphere of

meeting the educational goals will be reflected in lower assessment of the effects of education. To sum up, we can say that the overall effectiveness of education depends on the quality of the educational process. Efficiency thus presents not only a tool for improving the educational process, but also its expected result [14].

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