

COMMUNICATION AND MULTICULTURAL HIGHER EDUCATION IN ECONOMICS AND BUSINESS MANAGEMENT

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ABSTRACT

We have conducted a sociological survey on the Economics and Business Management students from a large Romanian north-west university, where academic instruction is offered in various languages, structured by lines of study.

Our survey focuses on the quality of communication and the problems encountered in the educational process from students' point of view, as well as on the differences in the perception of various categories of students. Relying on these findings, our goal is to determine means of improving the academic material provided to students, teachers' methods and behaviour, with a view to equip students with a high level of competence.

In this stage of our research, we have pinpointed the differences in the quality of teacher – student communication, as perceived by the final-year Master's students from the 4 lines of study: Romanian, English, Hungarian and German.

The comparative analysis based on the responses to a questionnaire designed by the authors is supplemented with data provided by the "portraits" of several university members who teach the 4 lines of study.

KEYWORDS: *creativity, critical approach, education line, professional training's quality, professor – student communication*

JEL CLASSIFICATION : *O, O15.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Within an organisation whose core activity is the educational process, the teacher is the performer, while the student is the beneficiary of this performance. Nevertheless, the performance can be delivered only based on the "client's material".

As such, in the process of professional development, the quality of communication relies on the content of the messages conveyed (written or oral), on the form of the message (clarity and correctness of the verbal language input), on the context of communication (the mood created by the performer, the physical space and its arrangement), on the behavioural model displayed by the teacher (body language, proxemics, attitude and decision-making), but also on the recipient's quality.

Learning entails collaboration between the sender and receiver, a fair speaking-listening ratio (Prutianu, 2000, p. 177-178) and a good teacher-student relationship.

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The instructor who conveys data and informs students about the outcomes of his/her own or other research undertakings should be endowed with other skills and abilities than the researcher (Chişu, 2002, p. 360-394 and Pânişoară & Pânişoară, 2005, p. 97-104). The teacher should understand himself the importance of new information and be able to drive students towards learning (Jere Brophy, 2010, p.10; Mendler, A. N., 2000).

We share the opinion of many other authors that the dynamics of any modern organisation may be explained through the communication process (Câmpeanu-Sonea & Sonea, 2011, p. 106-122; Sonea, 2011). The organization in itself is a dynamic concept subject to ongoing transformation, which means: structuring, institutional positioning, activity coordination and negotiation between group members, by means of a complex communication process (Putnam & Nicotera, 2009, p.33).

The efficiency of the system relies on a balanced collaboration and participation, with effort and benefits for all the parties involved (Grant, 2013). In the case of an education-oriented company, more than with other types of organisations, balance and collaboration hold a greater weight in the relationship built on communication, in order to obtain qualitative results.

2. BUSINESS STUDENTS' PERCEPTION OF THE QUALITY OF COMMUNICATION IN THE EDUCATIONAL PROCESS

2.1. Research method and objectives

We have attempted to determine to what extent the communication process, in the context of higher education, is likely to ensure the proper development of students, the acquirement of competences in line with employers' requirements and students' satisfaction in what regards their career path, from the perspective of the beneficiaries.

We consider that such findings could further facilitate the improvements needed in the educational process in terms of content and, more importantly, of the teaching methods employed, to the end of enhancing graduates' level of professional competence.

The study is part of a research project based on a sociological survey on 626 students (who have already completed no less than 4 years of graduate education), from an Economics and Business Management faculty.

The *questionnaire* was devised by the authors of this paper and includes statements related to the high quality of communication (both written and oral) between faculty members and students, while responses enabled assessments on a 0 to 5 scale, respectively:

0=non-answer; 1=total disagreement; 2=partial disagreement; 3=neither agreement, nor disagreement; 4=partial agreement; 5= total agreement.

Thus, the closer the average score of students' ratings is to 5, the more satisfied students are with the quality of teachers' performances.

Within this stage of our research we have conducted our survey on a sample of 496 students, of which 390 pursuing the Romanian line, 43 the English line, 38 the Hungarian line and 25 the German line. We used a theoretical sampling method (Taro Jamane, after Şerban, 2004, p. 78) and we corrected the theoretical size and structure according to the actual one. The responses to the questionnaire were processed via a SPSS application, and part of the results obtained are set out and detailed below.

The underlying *hypothesis* here is that there are major differences in the communication process at the level of the 4 lines of study. This is because there were differences in the objectives and needs which led to the establishment of the Romanian, English, Hungarian and respectively German line and, correspondingly, different channels and means to ensure material and human resources.

Thus, the Romanian line is the oldest in the faculty, backed by tradition and experience gained in time. The Hungarian and German lines initially addressed the need to ensure the possibility to study in the native language for a part of the corresponding populations. The idea to introduce English (and French) as languages of instruction aimed to give Romanian young people, regardless of

ethnicity, the opportunity to improve their foreign language skills and obtain jobs in multinational corporations, but also to attract foreign students.

The objectives were fulfilled, as Hungarian students are able to study in their native language. Even if the German line hosts students of other nationalities, the courses delivered in this international language, similarly to the English line, proved useful and widely demanded. The English line, besides a large number of Romanian citizens (of various ethnicity), hosts a series of students from France, Germany, Spain, Latin America, Norway, Poland, Japan, China etc.

Based on information acquired from employees of the surveyed faculty and several generations of students, we sketched some portraits of professors who teach the four lines of study.

The **Romanian line** is prevailed by old teachers (as age and academic experience), with complex qualifications and gradual and multidisciplinary education, achieved in the course of 20-25 years or even more.

Their (library) credentials are based on older and more recent publications, as well as specialisation internships in Romania or abroad. They are interested in the scientific depth and progress of the analysed processes, in methodology, in organising the academic content, in the synthesis and unitary approach to the economic-social processes and phenomena.

At the **English line**, the majority of the teachers are younger, but highly qualified, they study and master the methods employed in Western Europe and the United States of America, and they read books and materials on the INTERNET. They are particularly concerned with up-to-datedness, have undergone extensive internships abroad, are oriented towards matters of practical and immediate importance, which is a positive thing, even if they hold less pedagogical and research experience.

The **Hungarian line** presents two categories of teachers: some are locals and others come from foreign universities (Hungary and Austria). One of the portraits would mirror a teacher highly committed to students, concerned with in-depth scientific study of practical applicability, but also with students' moral education.

The second one would portray a foreign businessperson, involved in investments and business affairs, conducting research projects in large European or even American companies, experienced in business management and professional development for an efficient practical activity.

Similarly, foreign teachers prevail at the **German line** (from Germany and Austria), along with local teachers, trained by the former. Foreign teachers follow a modular work programme, are very rigorous in preparing and delivering lectures, but nothing less critical in making assessments, opposite to the Romanian faculty members.

There is also the category of local teachers who endeavour to attract students from the German language secondary schools, to analyse employers' needs and requirements, to restructure students' specialisation and practical training system.

2.2. Results of the questionnaire survey

Table 1 presents the all sample scores, representative for the entire group under survey, underlining at the same time the main content of the questionnaire.

Table 1. The mean scores (all sample)

Statements	Mean scores	Statements	Mean scores	Statements	Mean scores
1.1 Courses are attractive	3.85	2.2 Seminars are easy to understand	4.09	3.2 Tasks relate closely to the course and seminar	4.39
1.2 Courses are easy to understand	3.99	2.3 Seminars have a well systematised structure	4.03	3.3 Teachers' attitude allows students to earn grades justly	4.23

Statements	Mean scores	Statements	Mean scores	Statements	Mean scores
1.3 Courses have a well systematised structure	3.76	2.4 Seminars support the understanding of the subject matter taught in the course	4.33	4.1 The assignments for practical projects are accessible	4.13
1.4 Courses are useful for the specialisation pursued	3.89	2.5 Seminars are useful for the specialisation pursued	4.08	4.2 It is easy to find bibliography for the projects	3.88
1.5 Courses stimulate critical approach	3.42	2.6 Seminars stimulate critical approaches	3.67	4.3 The type of assessment and teachers' attitude allow students to earn grades justly	4.10
1.6 Courses develop personal understanding	3.74	2.7 Seminars develop personal understanding	3.89	5.1 The grades reflect the individual study correctly	3.93
1.7 Courses lead to the development of a system of thought corresponding to the specialisation pursued	4.01	2.8 Seminars stimulate creativity	3.80	5.2 The grades reflect participation in class correctly	3.71
1.8 Courses support the understanding of the subject	4.07	2.9 Seminars are held in a detached atmosphere	4.20	6.1 The skills obtained are useful in the profession for which they are training	3.72
1.9 Courses are delivered in a detached atmosphere	4.22	2.10 Seminars lead to the development of a system of thought corresponding to the specialisation pursued	4.08	6.2 The skills obtained are useful for starting a business	3.53
2.1 Seminars are attractive	3.98	3.1 Tasks are worded clearly and unequivocally	4.03	6.3 The skills obtained are useful in the personal life	3.61

Source: authors

All the mean scores are higher than the average appreciation level, which is 3. As such, the general appreciation (values ranging between 3.42 and 4.39) is that the educational process unfolds in proper conditions in terms of communication.

The lowest scores (below 3.70, see table 1), which point out the need for improvement, are related to:

- questions 1.5 (score 3.42) and 2.6 (score 3.67) related to stimulating students' critical approaches;
- Questions 6.2 (score 3.53) and 6.3 (score 3.61) related to the usefulness of students' training for incorporating a business or in their personal lives.

With regard to the comparison that we have contemplated for this phase of our research, table 2 and 3 highlight what in our opinion are some interesting findings.

As such, but for one exception (question 6.3), all the Romanian line scores are equal or higher than the all sample scores (tables 1 and 2).

The very close scores are doubtlessly explained by the fact that the number of Romanian line students have a greater weight in the sample (390 students from the Romanian line, 43 – English line, 38 – Hungarian line and 25 – German line). Moreover, according to students' perception, the teachers from the Romanian line are equipped with better communication means and methods or these students are less demanding and their critical sense is less developed.

Table 2. The mean scores according to Romanian and English lines respondents

Statements	Mean scores		Statements	Mean scores		Statements	Mean scores	
	R	E		R	E		R	E
1.1	3.87	3.77	2.2	4.13	4.21	3.2	4.41	4.40
1.2	4.01	4.40	2.3	4.07	3.95	3.3	4.24	4.23
1.3	3.79	3.67	2.4	4.37	4.29	4.1	4.17	3.95
1.4	3.93	3.74	2.5	4.12	3.93	4.2	3.93	3.77
1.5	3.42	3.35	2.6	3.67	3.57	4.3	4.12	3.95
1.6	3.76	3.63	2.7	3.91	3.69	5.1	3.94	3.71
1.7	4.05	3.90	2.8	3.82	3.83	5.2	3.74	3.69
1.8	4.10	4.07	2.9	4.23	4.02	6.1	3.75	3.49
1.9	4.24	4.12	2.10	4.13	3.90	6.2	3.54	3.33
2.1	4.01	3.88	3.1	4.08	3.84	6.3	3.59	3.71

Source: authors

Whichever the truth (both statements may be true), teachers from the other lines of study should pay more attention to the issues of teacher – student communication, since the client's perception is essential in assessing the quality of performance.

With reference to the English line (table 2), the most serious shortcomings pointed out by students are related to:

- usefulness of training for starting a business (6.2 - score 3.33) and for the profession pursued (6.1 - score 3.49);
- stimulation of critical approaches (1.5 – score 3.35 and 2.6 – score 3.57) and development of students' personal understanding (1.6 – score 3.63 and 2.7 – score 3.69);
- the systematisation of the course subject matter (1.3 – score 3.67) and fair grading, according to participation in class (5.2 – score 3.69).

The Hungarian line students are overall satisfied with the communication process, except for some instances (see table 3). Scores below 3.70, as shown in reference to the Romanian and English lines, occur for:

- question 1.2 (score 3.55), which means that students encounter difficulty in understanding the course materials;
- question 1.5 (score 3.57), which means that critical approaches are not sufficiently stimulated;
- Question 5.3 (score 3.54), pointing out an unbalanced reflection of class participation in students' grades.

Table 3. The mean scores according to Hungarian and German lines respondents

Statements	Mean scores		Statements	Mean scores		Statements	Mean scores	
	H	G		H	G		H	G
1.1	3.89	3.64	2.2	3.73	3.84	3.2	4.30	4.24
1.2	3.55	3.68	2.3	3.95	3.64	3.3	4.22	4.04
1.3	3.71	3.48	2.4	4.34	3.80	4.1	4.11	3.80
1.4	4.00	3.32	2.5	4.11	3.71	4.2	3.83	3.32
1.5	3.57	3.24	2.6	3.84	3.56	4.3	4.08	4.04
1.6	3.84	3.52	2.7	4.08	3.64	5.1	4.06	3.92
1.7	4.03	3.56	2.8	4.03	3.24	5.2	3.54	3.48
1.8	4.08	3.56	2.9	4.46	3.72	6.1	3.78	3.44
1.9	4.41	3.78	2.10	4.13	3.56	6.2	3.83	3.32
2.1	4.03	3.72	3.1	3.89	3.88	6.3	3.86	3.44

Source: authors

The most critical assessments emerge from the German line students (table 3), where except for three questions, all the scores are lower than the others lines of study. The exceptions are: 3.1 – exam tasks are enunciated clearly and unequivocally, 4.3 – grades are assigned fairly and 5.1 – grades reflect individual study correctly, where scores are significantly higher than those of the English line students.

We considered that the most reliable opinions regarding the usefulness of training for the profession, for starting a business and for students' personal life belong to the subjects who are employed, particularly in their field of training. As shown in table 4, the greatest number of employed students in the surveyed sample are from the German line, followed by the English line, while the Romanian line students rank third in this respect.

Table 4. Sample structure according to employability

Study's lines	Employees (% out of total)	Employees in their field of activity (% out of total)
R	75.54%	50.27%
E	81.40%	55.81%
H	59.61%	51.02%
G	83.33%	62.50%
TOTAL	74.80%	51.43%

Source: authors

In light of the above, the extremely low scores of questions 6.1; 6.2 and 6.3 become particularly important, and the materials, as well as the teaching methods should seriously concern the German, English and Romanian line teachers, in what regards their usefulness and efficiency.

Table 5. Sample structure according to gender and age

Study's lines	Gender (% out of total) M / F	Age (average) M / F
R	25.26% / 74.74%	23.66 / 23.56
E	37.21% / 62.79%	23.94 / 23.41
H	16.22% / 83.78%	24.50 / 23.10
G	29.17% / 70.83%	23.57 / 23.82
TOTAL	25.82% / 74.18%	23.73 / 23.52

Source: authors

Considering sociologists' opinion according to which men, as a rule, are more critical than women and young people tend to criticise more than older people, we observed the surveyed sample structure according to gender and age (table 5).

In terms of age, differences are insignificant. All the surveyed subjects are around 23-24 years old, and exceptions are scarce. As regards the Hungarian line (males), the average age is slightly higher, which might explain the tendency of "indulgence" in relation to some answers.

According to the gender structure, the strongest critical attitude should come from the English line. Nevertheless, the lowest scores are registered with the German line, which drives us to the conclusion that greater heed should be paid to the communication process with these students.

Table 6. Correlations between usefulness of courses, seminars, knowledge and skills (all sample)

	1.4	2.5	6.1	6.2	6.3
1.4 Courses are useful for the specialization pursued	1	0.547**	0.435**	0.409**	0.343**
2.5 Seminars are useful for the specialization pursued		1	0.478**	0.425**	0.351**
6.1 The skills obtained are useful in the profession for which they are training			1	0.649**	0.488**
6.2 The skills obtained are useful for starting a business				1	0.560**
6.3 The skills obtained are useful in the personal life					1
N = 497					

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

Source: authors

Tables 6 and 7 bear evidence of some correlations of acceptable strength (coefficients of 0.343-0.351), moderate strength (0.421-0.571) and high strength (0.610-0.649), which prove the reliability of students' assessments in completing the questionnaire. This means that students who find the course and seminar materials useful have responded accordingly to questions 6.1; 6.2 and 6.3 (table 6).

The subjects who appreciated the stimulation of critical thinking, personal development and creativity in a certain manner have given responses which correlate appropriately to the questions related to course and seminar topics.

Table 7. Correlations between personal understanding, critical approaches and creativity (all sample)

	1.5	1.6	2.6	2.7	2.8
1.5 Courses stimulate critical approach	1	0.538**	0.505**	0.456**	0.431**
1.6 Courses develop personal understanding		1	0.421**	0.610**	0.447**
2.6 Seminars stimulate critical approaches			1	0.571**	0.539**
2.7 Seminars develop personal understanding				1	0.545**
2.8 Seminars stimulate creativity					1
N=497					

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

Source: authors

Should we consider the responses according to lines of study, correlations are even stronger. For example, with the English line, the correlation coefficient between 1.5 (critical approach stimulation thorough courses) and 1.6 (personal understanding stimulation) is 0.743; between 1.5 and 2.6 (critical approach stimulation thorough seminars) is 0.670 etc. Such correlations prove sensitivity and understanding of the research objective on the part of the surveyed students.

3. CONCLUSIONS

As presumed based on previous observations and data, there are significant differences between the standpoints and perceptions of the four student categories, which validate our hypothesis.

Significant differences occur in case of the students holding working experience in their field of academic training, of the gender structure and, to a low extent, of the age structure. Nevertheless, the most important differences are not related to the sample structure by four lines of study, but to how the academic activity and the teacher-student communication are conducted.

Particular attention, according to the perceptions of the German and English line students should be paid to the study materials, teaching methods and teachers' behaviour, with a view to increasing the usefulness of training for the future profession, for the incorporation of a business and for students' personal life.

Overall, teachers' attitude enabling students to obtain fair grades is rated favourably, similarly to the appropriate relationship between courses and seminar topics, which translates as professionalism, pedagogical skills and proper preparation of the part of the faculty members.

Apart from the German line students, respondents are satisfied with the study environment and the system of thought developed by the teachers from various departments. Although in the main the Hungarian line students obtained good scores versus the other lines of study, they consider that the course subject matter is difficult to understand and grades fail to reflect students' participation in class properly, shortcomings which call for improvement.

Likewise, improvement should be oriented, for all lines of study, towards the stimulation of critical sense, personal approaches and creativity.

We have pleaded for the urgency of improvement measures particularly where scores fell below level 4 (a randomly -established threshold) by more than 0.25 points, but on no account does this mean that things are otherwise perfect.

In our opinion, the results of the survey also captured some *influences of national and organisational cultures*, in the behaviour and system of thought of the teachers from the 4 lines of study, as well as in the Romanian or foreign employers' demands. These influences materialise in:

- the Romanian line faculty members are highly qualified and committed, consistent with the tradition of our educational system, but less drastic in the evaluation and grading system;
- the educational outcomes of younger teachers through training and specialisation internships in Western Europe or America, but also the demands issued by the management of multinational corporations, which exerted a great influence upon the English line students;
- the teaching methods of the Hungarian line teachers, shaped by their training and experience within foreign organisations, yet less common in our country;
- German teachers' rigour and strictness have influenced to a great extent their students' assessments, who are moreover pressured by the demands of the German-owned companies where they are employed.

Starting from these findings, we will further our research with a detailed analysis aimed to establish the measures required for the improvement of communication in higher education, separately for each line of study according to its specific issues and challenges.

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