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Convergence at What Cost? A Quasi Experiment of Professional Identity under the Bologna Process

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ABSTRACT

The Bologna Process instituted measures promoting common curriculum throughout Europe with three-year standards established for Bachelor programs in economics, humanistic and positive sciences, and four-year standards for engineering sciences. Dramatic reductions were made to programs resulting in students moving into the workforce at a faster pace and with fewer academic credits. Questions existed as to whether three-year programs were sufficient for professional identity development. Professional identity, a system of attributes and values one has about self in relation to professional role, is essential for professional culture integration. This chapter employs a quasi-experimental design to compare professional identity development of Romanian business students ranging from first- through third-year using 2012 data and fourth-year students using 2007 data. Findings reveal professional identity within post-Bologna Process programs rose from first year to second but fell in the end-of-program third year. Data from pre-Bologna Process programs show higher measures of professional identity for end-of-program fourth-year students. Interpretations are provided and student workforce readiness discussed.

INTRODUCTION

The Bologna Process (BFUG, 2005; Bratianu & Atanasiu, 2004; The Bologna Declaration, 1999) put in place educational reforms designed to foster the mobility of students, the attractiveness of high-

er education, the employability of graduates, and the development of “a global learning platform” emphasizing “transparent and common curriculum throughout Europe” (Dima *et al*, 2011, p. 126). Pillars of reform included the implementation of comparable elements of academic structure, e.g.,

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-8632-8.ch072

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degrees, academic credits, learning outcomes, competencies, and program standards. The first two objectives in the Bologna Declaration refer to a common framework of undergraduate and graduate studies throughout the European Higher Education Area:

- Adoption of a system of easily readable and comparable degrees, also through the implementation of the Diploma Supplement, in order to promote European citizens employability and the international competitiveness of the European higher education system.
- Adoption of a system essentially based on two main cycles, undergraduate and graduate. Access to the second cycle shall require successful completion of the first cycle studies, lasting a minimum of three years. The degree awarded after the first cycle shall also be relevant to the European labour market as an appropriate level of qualification. The second cycle should lead to the master and/or doctorate degree as in many European countries.

After the meeting in Berlin, the higher education framework has been finally decided to contain three levels: undergraduate, master and doctoral studies. Thus, addressing a need for compatibility, comparability, and convergence of degree structures, the European countries promoted through their national parliaments a new legislation. In Romania, this new higher education structure has been promoted in 2004, although master programs existed before as an optional direction for continuing university studies. The educational model was restructured to provide degrees in three cycles: the Bachelor's degree (three years); the Master's degree (two years), and the Doctoral degree (three years). This structure is valid only for classical fields of science, economics and humanistic studies. For engineering studies, the undergraduate

programs run for four years. Shortening lengthy first-cycle degrees without sacrificing academic and pedagogical rigor proved a concern for most university programs. First steps for many academic programs included identifying and deleting "fluff" courses, realigning program standards and competencies within collapsed courses, improving curricula design within courses and programs, advancing an appreciation for student-centered teaching concepts, and introducing/ implementing effective quality assurance measures within courses and across programs.

Still, critics question whether a three-year program will allow enough time for assimilation, reflection, and the sufficient development of critical approaches to learning (Dima *et al*, 2011, p. 126). The present study examines the professional identity development of Romanian business students participating in three-year degree programs, compares these results with results obtained from Romanian business students participating in four-year degree programs, and provides an overview and analysis of the results. This quasi-experimental study is guided by the following research questions:

1. Does professional identity increase as student's move through a bachelor's degree program?
2. Does the professional identity of third year end-of-program students differ from the professional identity of fourth year end-of-program students?

PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT MODELS

Professional identity has been defined as "the relatively stable and enduring constellation of attributes, beliefs, values, motives and experiences in terms of which people define themselves in a professional role" (Ibarra, 1999, p. 764). Research

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