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**CONTEXTUAL CURRICULUM: PERSPECTIVE OF
CORRELATING EDUCATIONAL AND PROFESSIONAL
ACTIVITIES**

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Abstract

The conceptualization of a contextual academic curriculum is generated by external factors, by the needs of the labor market with reference to the level of professional competences of higher education institutions' graduates. It is certified by the employers that the graduates' competences do not allow them to efficiently exercise their professional functions. At the same time, graduates affirm the existence of discrepancies between the content of academic activity and the content of professional activity. The key idea of the contextual academic curriculum is related to an interconnected approach to academic competences and professional competences as a teleological approach, to valorize on active, interactive and innovative didactic strategies. The key concept of the contextual curriculum relates to the holistic and integrative approach to the factors that influence and determine the content substance of this document. Importantly, guidelines were established for the interconnection between external contexts and internal contexts; academic skills and professional skills; curricular contents and types of professional activities. In a comparative plane is widely analysed the learning activity within the university and the professional activity in respective field on the dimensions: needs, motives, actions, subjects, outcomes. Examples of modelling contextual university curriculum are presented.

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1. Introduction

University autonomy offers higher education institutions the opportunity and responsibility to design, develop and implement academic curricula in accordance with the mission of their own educational strategies, but also with the trends in the development of curriculum theory on a national and international level.

In this context, the university academic curriculum represents a concept, a theory, but also the set of official documents, which regulate the reference framework of the university curriculum regarding the outcomes, contents, didactic and research strategies, outcomes, having the priority role, in relation to which designs all the competences of university curriculum. It should be noted that the objectives in curricular framework are represented by a system of competences: key competences, professional competences, academic competences, competences specific to some professional profiles, in the given case the pedagogical profile.

Competences represent a transferable and multifunctional package of knowledge, capabilities, attitudes, which allow the person to achieve professional development, social inclusion and professional insertion on the labor market (Guțu, 2014).

The concept of “competence”, as a rule, is treated from a teleological perspective, as a result/outcome of the learning act. However, if we look at competence from an action perspective, we can say that it is always contextual (situational). This approach assumes a system of situations specific to one or another professional field, in the given case, the educational field. On the other hand, no academic curriculum includes the “context” component in its structure. This fact caused the need for the foundation and design of a contextual academic curriculum. In favor of this concept we can add other arguments:

- i. valorizing on the context in ensuring the interconnection between the psychocentric and sociocentric approach, between theory and practice, between teaching-learning-evaluation, between the needs of labor market and the professional competences formed within the university;
- ii. valorizing on the context in the design of learning content, including the content of academic subjects;
- iii. valorizing on the context in the establishment of didactic strategies and evaluation of learning outcomes, namely in real or modeled contexts, student performances can be appreciated.

Therefore, the foundation and conceptualization of a contextual academic curriculum becomes current and timely in order to ensure the quality of personal training of higher education institutions' graduates (Guțu et al., 2020; Guțu et al., 2021; Guțu, 2022; Guțu et al., 2022).

2. Problem Statement

Rapid changes in the labor market, key changes in the higher education system, generated by external factors (globalization, computerization; economic, pandemic, human challenges) and internal factors (focus on competences, interactive learning, promotion of transdisciplinary, etc.) have caused the emergence of a problem related to the efficiency and timeliness of the academic curriculum in function, which is more oriented to different contexts: educational, economic and social.

The study focuses on a fundamental theoretical framework of well-known researchers: (Allal, 2002; Blândul, 2015; Dandara et al., 2018; Guțu & Vicol, 2014; Hinzen, 2018; Iucu & Marin, 2018; Jonnaert et al., 2006; Kuhn, 2008).

3. Research Questions

How can we define a contextual academic curriculum? What are the innovative aspects of a contextual curriculum? What is the difference between learning a profession and professional activity? How can different categories of competences be integrated into the contextual curriculum: general competences, professional competences, specific competences?

4. Purpose of the Study

Substantiation of a contextual academic curriculum from the perspective of current labor market needs and correlation of learning activities with professional ones.

Objectives of the study:

- i. defining of the notion of “contextual curriculum”;
- ii. substantiation of the concept of “context” from different perspectives: psychological, informational, sociocultural, educational, etc.;
- iii. establishment of the valences and differences between the learning activity of a profession and the respective professional activity;
- iv. modelling of a contextual curriculum in the “Educational Management” discipline.

General hypothesis of the study: we assume that the substantiation and elaboration of a contextual academic curriculum must focus on studying the current needs of the labour market, correlating real professional actions with learning actions in academia and integrating different categories of competences in the context structure.

5. Research Methods

The concept and logic of this study generate the use of the following research methods: theoretical analysis of different approaches to the contextual curriculum, theoretical modeling, comparison and synthesis of different approaches, modeling of contexts in the curriculum.

6. Findings

Theoretical benchmarks of the foundation of contextual academic curriculum:

The first benchmark concerns the polyaspect approach to the curriculum, in general, and the academic curriculum, in particular. In this context, the curriculum is defined by us as follows: “*the curriculum is a conceptual and praxiological model that realizes the educational policies of the state, built on the basis of factors’ theory, contexts’ theory and made up of a necessary and full number of components in interrelations, ensuring the development/self-development of personality*”. It should be noted that there are numerous definitions of the curriculum from different perspectives that can be divided

into two categories: (1) definitions of the curriculum in a restricted/narrow sense; (2) definitions of the curriculum with extensive, broad meanings.

In the given article we are talking about the academic curriculum in the narrow sense, an academic discipline that includes in its structure the following elements: the curriculum concept, the competences system, content units, contexts, processes (teaching strategies), methodological and evaluation suggestions.

The curriculum in the academic discipline is a reflection of the general concept of curriculum viewed as theory, as domain, as content, as process, as result and as structure. The structuring of these components fits into the logic of building educational systems with inputs and outputs, specific functions within cyclical and contextual functioning. Namely, the *context* category, to a large extent, ensures the interconnection of all curricular components (Dandara et al., 2018).

The second benchmark concerns the approach to the concept of contextual academic curriculum design. The design of contextual academic curriculum represents a complex and systemic approach to anticipating and carrying out the training activity, based on the contextual-integrative approach that involves the identification, selection and organization of its components according to several factors, including the contextual/situational one.

The concept of designing the contextual academic curriculum is based on the following perspectives:

- i. The perspective related to the general design approach, which involves the following actions: diagnosis, conceptualization, design, implementation, monitoring of the designed curriculum.
- ii. The perspective related to the consecutiveness of designing the contextual academic curriculum components for one or another study discipline: the curriculum concept, the competences system, the content and contexts, learning activities, methodological and evaluation suggestions.
- iii. The perspective related to the procedural realization of the contextual academic curriculum, the development of “large” learning units, as well as operational learning sequences, focused on modeled contexts and situations.

So, the contexts are in close correlation with all the components of the academic curriculum, but as a destabilizing component they appear in direct connection with the content units in the curriculum: competence units → content units → learning context.

The third benchmark concerns the approach to the concept of “context” from the curricular perspective. In the specialized literature, two categories of contexts are highlighted: the inner/intrinsic context and the outer/extrinsic context: the diversity of life situations, in the given case of professional situations, of learning situations. It is known that, thanks to the context, the person can consciously interpret and analyze different situations. In other words, the situations/context generate activity, thinking, motivation, as well as create favorable conditions for the development of professional competences by activating and valorizing on one’s own experiences. It is important to take into account the existing contradictions between academic and professional activity, viewed from a contextual perspective and characterized by different contents (Table 1).

Table 1. Structure of Academic and Professional Activity: Comparative Plan (Guțu, 2020)

Structural Links of Educational Activities	Educational Activity	Professional Activity
Needs	Cognition Activity	Labor Activity
Motives	Assimilation of New Knowledge, Obtaining a Profession	Lifelong Professional Training, Self-Training
Objectives	General and Professional Development of Personality	Production of Values and Material Provision
Actions	Cognition, Research, Learning	Praxiological, Productional
Means	Strategies and Learning Forms	Specific to Each Profession
Object	Typology of Profiles and Activity Fields	Career and Professional Achievement
Outcomes	Knowledge, Capacities, Attitudes (Competences)	Specific to Each Profession

The comparative analysis of academic and professional activity allows us to conclude. The assimilation of professional activity in the university setting must be ensured by a contextual academic curriculum. At the same time, the comparative analysis of academic and professional activity allowed us to formulate a set of conceptual provisions, which must be taken into account in the process of designing the contextual academic curriculum:

- i. Developing the motivation for learning is the main objective of the didactic activity, while the practical activity is professional motivation and growth in the professional career.
- ii. Sciences, types of human activities represent the object and content of the training activity, professional types and profiles – the object of professional activity.
- iii. The educational content is represented by the diversity of study objects, sometimes less interconnected, while in the professional activity the content has an integrated character.
- iv. In the educational process, the student is in the active position only when performing teaching tasks, and in the process of performing the professional activity, the subject is permanently in the active position.
- v. The forms and learning situations modeled in the university framework are in many cases not consistent with those of professional activities.
- vi. Autonomous and individualized learning is dominant in the university setting, and professional activity is predominantly collective.

Although, in recent years, higher education is oriented towards more effective integration with the workplace, towards joint learning, in groups, but also individually, modeling different contexts as initial professional training strategies. However, it is obvious that the student is involved in an activity that is very different from the professional one. And after graduating from university, they encounter great difficulties in professional and social adaptation (Kuhn, 2008; Iucu & Marin, 2018).

In this vein, the concept of contextual academic curriculum will focus on the formation of academic and professional competences, the context being a curricular category, which ensures the integrity of academic and professional activity.

6.1. Integrated contextual corrugation: methodological approach

Contextual academic curriculum must ensure the interconnection of academic activity and professional activity by valorizing on all curricular components: content, process, purposes. Emphasis being placed, on the one hand, on modeling processes of different contexts, characteristic of professional activity, on the other hand, the transfer of academic activities into the real professional area, as a rule, this is achieved through internships.

Therefore, the integration and interconnection of academic and professional activity, but also the transformation of the academic approach into the professional one, implies the need for changes in the curricular framework and, first of all, in the teaching-learning-evaluation process, namely:

- i. diversification of the contextual approach: past contextual models, current contextual models and prospective contextual models;
- ii. holistic, interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary approach to study goals, as a factor integrating training and professional activity;
- iii. organization and valorization of the learning content in dynamics, in relation to the constantly changing internal and external conditions;
- iv. creating contexts for imitating professional activities from the perspective of innovations and technological transfer, as well as imitating professional roles, generated by contexts within the academic curriculum.

The analysis and presentation of different theoretical provisions, the specific characteristics of the contextual academic curriculum allows us to deduce and formulate a set of principles, on which the approach to this type of curriculum is based:

- i. *Taxonomic principle* of selecting and organizing different contexts in the structure of the contextual academic curriculum.
- ii. *Principle of integrity* of the learning activity and the professional activity carried out on a contextual basis.
- iii. *Principle of transferability* of the professional activities in the structure of learning activity by valorizing on the respective contexts and appropriate teaching methods.
- iv. *Principle of psychopedagogical approach of the contextual academic curriculum*: situational content, interactive didactic strategies, autonomous student activity.
- v. *Principle of selecting and organizing content units* in dynamics, related to the substance of the context in the academic curriculum.
- vi. *Principle of correlation of innovative technologies in education and innovative technologies in the respective professional field*.
- vii. *Principle of reporting to the current dynamics and needs, the psychological peculiarities of students and the requirements of the labor market*.
- viii. *Principle of integrating student-centered and competences-centered approaches*, the context being a means of achieving this process.

The general concept of the contextual academic curriculum focuses on the integrity of the learning activity and the professional activity, achieved through the curricular component “context”, the interactive didactic strategies, which shape the cognitive and professional actions of the students. In this

sense, the context can fulfill the function of integrating student-centered education and education oriented towards the formation of academic and professional competences in their integrity (Guțu et al., 2022).

Examples of contexts that can be included in the university curriculum. For example, the following contexts can be included in the curriculum for the “*Decision Making in Framework of Educational Management*” discipline (Table 2).

Table 2. Subject: “Decision Making in Framework of Educational Management” (Guțu, 2022)

Objectives/ Competences Units	Contents Units	Modeled Contexts
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identifying and characterizing types of decisions in educational management. Analysis of different decision-making models: rational-normative, active-participative, strategic. Description and argumentation of activities in order to make a decision. Modeling decision-making in different contexts/situations. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Decision-making – basic competence in the educational management structure. Typology of decisions in educational management. Decision-making models in educational management. Stages, actions and steps regarding decision-making in managerial framework. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Head of educational institution does not have all the information to make a correct decision. How does he/she proceed? Head of educational institution does not trust his/her team and makes important decisions reluctantly. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Head of the educational institution places responsibility for decision-making on subordinates; he/she imposes his/her own decisions on his/her subordinates.

7. Conclusions

The concept of contextual academic curriculum comes to integrate the learning activity and the professional activity through the curricular component “context” and through the approach centered on the formation of academic and professional competences in its integrity from the perspective of student-centered education.

Giving the concept of “contex” the status of a disadvantageous element in the structure of academic curriculum, opens new perspectives for the initial professional training of specialists closer to the needs of the labor market, both from the perspective of professional adaptation and from the perspective of social adaptation.

For the first time, it is proposed to select, formulate and present in the academic curriculum a system of contexts, generated by the particularities of professional activity in one professional field or another, but also by the qualifications that will be obtained by the students.

The contextual academic curriculum must correspond to the characteristics of integrity, complexity and openness to the development and continuous improvement of the process of initial training of specialists.

The general theory of curriculum, as well as the methodology of designing the educational curriculum can be supplemented with the concept of “context” as an approach and element of structure.

In this sense, a new principle of curriculum development can be deduced – the principle of contextuality.

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