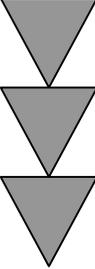


THE BUILDING "LEARNING ORGANISATION" ELEMENTS  
IN THE INTERDISCIPLINARY RESEARCH AND TEACHER EDUCATION  
MASTER PROGRAMME AT THE BUCHAREST ACADEMY  
OF ECONOMIC STUDIES



Laura MUREȘAN

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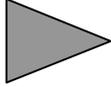
**Abstract**

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*"Learning Organisation" concepts and characteristics are usually associated with specific management systems and approaches to human resources development in companies. The aim of this article is that of exploring to what extent an interdisciplinary research and teacher education Master programme can meet both institutional needs and personal professional interests. The case study analysed here is provided by the Interdisciplinary Master programme "English Language Education and Research Communication in Business and Economics" at The Bucharest Academy of Economic Studies. How are its component elements inter-connected and which of its characteristics are comparable to those of a "learning organisation"? To answer to these questions, reference will be made to various processes and stages within the programme, such as needs analysis, multiple perspective evaluation, including feedback already received on the programme's impact on the institutional environment, a.s.o.*

**Keywords:** learning organisation, professional development, self-assessment, programme evaluation



### *The "Learning Organisation" approach*

The history of the “*Learning Organisation*” idea flows from different streams of thought about learning, organisations, training and development, the management of quality (Pedler et al., 1991). Even if there are different interpretations of this concept, and various authors place “*different emphasis on different aspects of a learning organisation (...), there is the common thread of a holistic approach and that organisational learning is greater than the sum of individual learning in the organisation.*” (Torrington & Hall, 1987/1995: 308)

In addition, there is the long-term, forward-looking dimension, closely linked with the idea of “*generative learning*”, as in Senge (1990), who sees the learning company as

“an organisation that is continually expanding its capacity to create its future. For such an organisation it is not enough merely to survive. ‘Survival learning’ or what is more often termed ‘adaptive (...) learning’ is important – indeed it is necessary. But for a learning organisation, ‘adaptive learning’ must be joined by ‘generative (...) learning’, learning that enhances our capacity to be creative”. (Senge, 1990 – after Cornelius, 1999: 90)

It would be beyond the scope of this article to go into a comprehensive literature review. Instead, we will only briefly list the key dimensions or characteristics of a "learning organisation", so as to use them as reference points in section 4 in relation to the interdisciplinary Master programme at our university:

1. “*The learning approach to strategy*” (company policy and strategy formation are consciously structured as a learning process, where managerial acts are rather deliberate small-scale experiments than set solutions)
2. “*Participative policy-making*” (including diversity, allowing everyone to have a say; ability to deal with conflict, which is seen as a source of creativity; delighting customers)
3. “*Informating*” (information technology to inform and empower people, to understand systems and variation)
4. “*Formative accounting and control*” (the systems of accounting and budgeting are structured to assist learning; the ethos of self-responsibility)

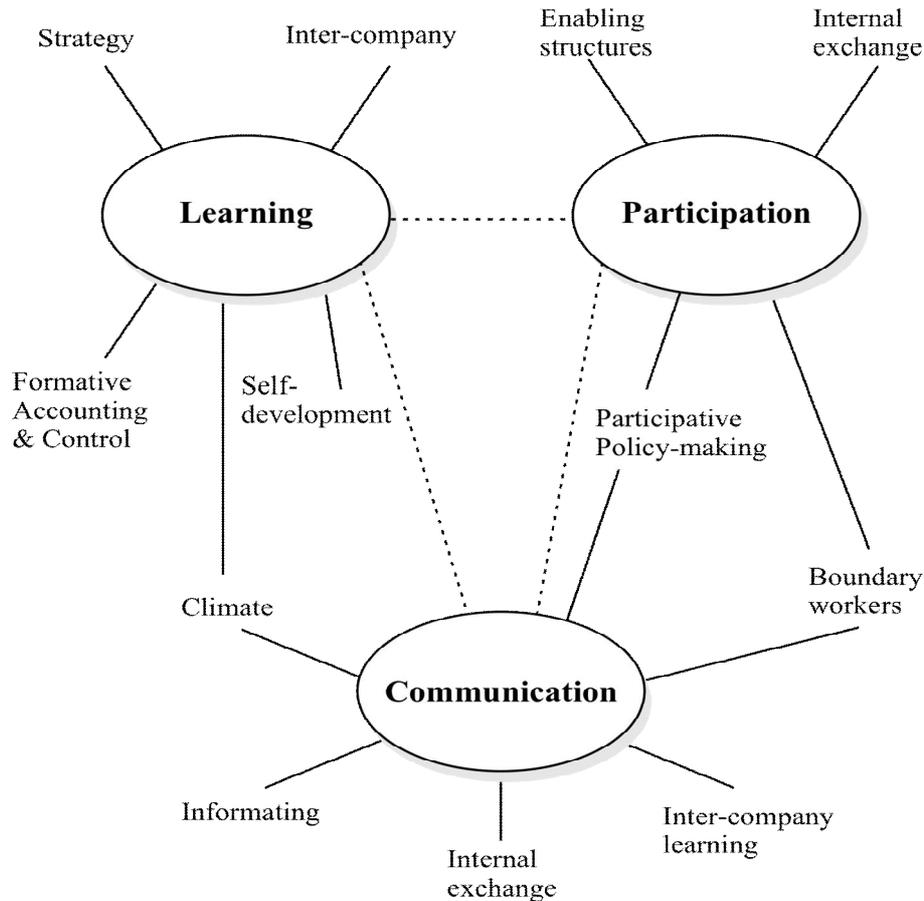
5. “*Internal exchange*” (all internal units and departments see themselves as internal customers and suppliers respectively; win-win approach, encouraging co-operation)
6. “*Reward flexibility*” (looking for new ways of rewarding people, not just money; shared values and assumptions, including discussion and trying out of alternatives)
7. “*Enabling structures*” (an organisational architecture with a flexible approach to department boundaries)
8. “*Boundary workers as environmental scanners*” (i.e. “information gatherers” – ideally all staff members who have contact with external customers, suppliers, or any other source of information, thus systematically collecting data from outside, esp. in order to identify emerging customer needs and wishes)
9. “*Inter-company learning*”, also referred to as “*benchmarking*” or “win-win learning”
10. “*Learning climate*” (including learning from experience, experimenting, trying out new ideas, learning in the process, involving all factors in the process)
11. “*Self-development opportunities for all*”

(Pedler et al., 1991: Chapter 3)

For simplification purposes, we are suggesting a synthetic representation, where the diversity of features enumerated above could be seen as clustered around three dimensions, standing out as focal points:

- Learning***
- Participative processes***, involving all factors
- Communication and information.***

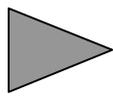
The inter-relatedness among the "learning organisation" features and the possible clusters around the three dimensions mentioned above could be summarised synthetically as follows in figure 1.



**Figure 1 - "An alternative model"**

Source: Mureşan, 2004: 22

In what follows, we shall explore the interactions among these dimensions at various levels within an academic framework, with special reference to the interdisciplinary Research and Teacher Education Master programme in our context. One of our aims will be to see to what extent professional development at all levels within the programme generates new attitudes and contributes to quality enhancement in the wider academic context.



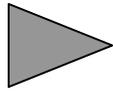
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***The interdisciplinary research and teacher education  
Master programme at The Bucharest Academy of  
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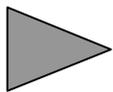
***Objectives***

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The main aims of this Master programme are threefold:

- to contribute to improving teaching methodology, with a focus on the needs of HE for business and economics in an English-medium academic context
- to facilitate the development of advanced communication competencies in English, both for academic purposes and for international communication in a variety of professional settings
- to contribute to improving research practice, with a focus on both methodological aspects and related communication skills for presenting and publishing research outcomes internationally.



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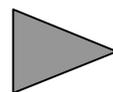
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***Who is this Master programme intended for?***

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The target group includes academics, teachers, researchers with an interest in developing their competencies in the above mentioned areas, as well as philology graduates teaching English for business and economics, ESP teachers in general, who may then contribute, as multipliers, to facilitating the development of specific skills in academic and research contexts.



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***Needs and interests at institutional and individual level***

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At an institutional level, this Master programme is part of the university's medium- and long-term strategic plan of promoting Professional Development in close correlation with Quality Assurance processes. At the same time, it is intended to

make a contribution to the university's implementing English-medium programmes both at undergraduate and at post-graduate / Master level<sup>1</sup>.

To ensure the programme's responding also to the participants' individual needs and interests, Needs Analysis has been carried out prior to the beginning of each new series of courses. In addition to the candidates' having to submit a *Letter of Intent*, needs analysis has been integrated in the personalised interview, which serves multiple purposes:

- English language proficiency (self-)assessment, in accordance with the *Common Scale of Reference Levels* (Council of Europe, 2001)
- awareness raising to the communicative approach to language learning and the value of realistic self-assessment, in line with concepts and instruments developed at European level (Council of Europe, 2001; EAQUALS-ALTE, 2000)
- identifying personal professional development interests in relation to this Master
- induction to the methodological approach and the specificity of this interdisciplinary Master programme.

Between 2006 and 2008, three cohorts of Master students started this Master programme; Needs Analysis has, thus, been carried out - moderated by the programme co-ordinators - with 3 series of candidates (representing a total of 70 participants). The common denominators in terms of interests formulated by the candidates were: (a) to improve their English language proficiency - in general and for specific purposes (such as participation in international conferences and projects); (b) to improve teaching methodology, so as to be able to teach their subject in English; (c) to improve the way they carry out research; (d) to improve writing skills, so as to be able to write articles in English for publication in specialised journals.

More specific personal interests included areas such as:

- "to increase the quality of evaluation and selection processes, with a focus on evaluation methods both for student assessment and evaluation of projects";
- interdisciplinarity - "to get to know colleagues from other departments and from other countries"; to set up /become part of networks with other colleagues within the university;
- "critical thinking", both for one's own work and "to develop critical thinking skills in students";

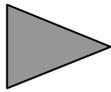
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<sup>1</sup> As presented by Professor Ion Gh. Rosca, Rector of the Bucharest Academy of Economic Studies, in a planning meeting with the Head of the Department for Business English and German, Prof. Georgeta Ghiga, and the programme co-ordinator / the author of this article (June 2006)

- "academic reflection and academic skills, especially academic writing for the doctoral studies" (interests expressed by the candidates who were, at the same time, also doctoral students);
- learning how to design project applications and to participate successfully in international projects.

As compared to the first series, with the 2nd and 3rd series of candidates we could notice an increase of awareness regarding the methodological approach adopted in the Master programme and also more detailed expectations from the programme, largely based on feedback and recommendations passed on by the first series of participants. A comparative analysis of these similarities and differences could become the focus of another study.

In what follows, we shall outline, instead, some features of this interdisciplinary Master programme, to illustrate how it aims to cater for both institutional and individual needs and interests.



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***How does the Interdisciplinary Master programme cater for specific needs and interests?***

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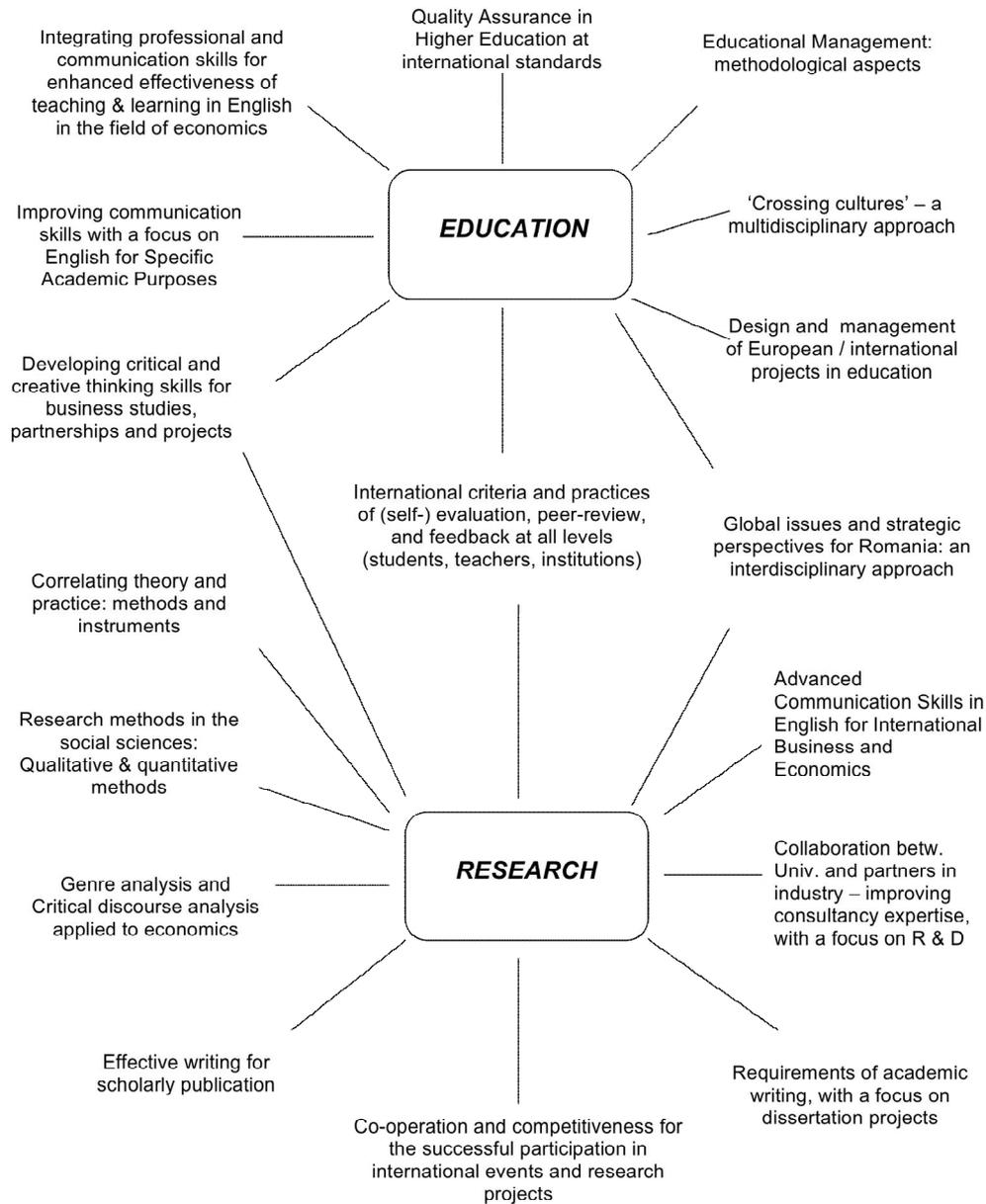
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To address the main objectives set out in the planning stage, this Master programme includes clusters of components interlinked thematically, on the one hand, and ensuring methodological coherence, on the other. The diagram (figure 2) illustrates the conceptual framework<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> The initial framework was designed in consultation with Professor Emeritus Norman Fairclough, Dr. Mirela Bardi, Prof. Georgeta Ghiga, Prof. Dr. Mihai Korca, Dr. Cristina Neesham

**Interdisciplinary Master Programme  
English Language Education and Research Communication in Economics  
- Overview -**



**Figure 2 - Conceptual framework of the Interdisciplinary Master Programme**

From the very beginning, evaluation has been carried out in a variety of forms, in order to gather on-going feedback on as many aspects as possible, e.g. the degree to which the participants' needs and interests have been met, their perceptions of the communication processes, perceptions of progress made, suggestions for improvement, etc.. Thus, the evaluation process has included:

- multi-perspective evaluation on an on-going basis - e.g. inviting informal feedback from the MA participants, tutors' feedback on the participants' progress and perceptions of the programme, self-reflection, peer and team consultation for on-going quality enhancement, observation of courses and seminars (e.g. when peer-teaching or by the programme coordinators and peer-tutors 'sitting in'), class observation by tutors or peers, as well as by academics not directly involved in the programme
- course evaluation - asking the participants to provide feedback on individual course modules and tutors, (a) using the standard questionnaire template provided by the university, or (b) responding in writing to open-ended questions
- progress evaluation in relation to personal interests and needs, in the form of semi-structured interviews, combined with self-assessment, and tutor feedback
- programme evaluation - by the participants (a) responding to a questionnaire specifically designed for this Master programme, (b) providing synthetic feedback on key aspects of the programme after the presentation of their dissertations
- external evaluation and accreditation by ARACIS - the National Quality Assurance System for Higher Education

Examples of self-evaluation in relation to progress made during this programme include:

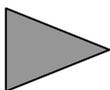
- a) with reference to English language skills improvement: "improved understanding of extensive contributions, lectures, input in specialised English"; improved vocabulary, better fluency; "improved listening comprehension" and awareness of "the importance of listening";
- b) on the teaching side: "progress in terms of teaching skills, better rapport with students, improved selection of teaching materials"; "more objective assessment criteria and transparency of procedures"; "improving English for teaching purposes, becoming more confident when using English in class";
- c) with reference to research and related communication: "participation in international conferences, already after the first semester of this Master", "successful networking and entering into professional partnerships with colleagues from other countries for future research projects"; "successful presentations in my own professional context";

- d) in terms of personal development, in general: becoming "more mature professionally"; "more confidence, in general"; "thinking in English, not just translating".

Overall feedback on the programme and on progress made by the participants has been positive, and it included also attitudinal aspects and reference to personal gains which had not been part of the initial objectives. Thus, the change of perspective has brought about also a re-visiting of personal aims and priorities. The main constraints mentioned referred to an over-load of the participants' personal schedule and the regret that sometimes they could not invest as much time as they would have liked to dedicate especially to reading outside class hours. Other practical remarks regarding concrete course aspects were taken into account for fine-tuning both the provision of content and the introduction of new course components.

Consultation meetings with the management of the university contributed to the strategic integration of this interdisciplinary master in the university's medium- and long-term development plan, as well as a close correlation between teacher/researcher personal development and the institutional quality assurance policy (as mentioned also under *institutional needs and interests*). These meetings also allowed the programme coordinators to get institutional feedback regarding snowball effects at various levels within the university.

An impact study is still in its early days and small-scale, based especially on informal feedback on the effects participation in the programme has had on the MA students' and graduates' career development, the perceived quality enhancement of their work, and an enrichment of activities, often materialised in their starting to teach their subject specialism via the medium of English. Further outcomes include teaching materials reflecting methodological approaches experienced throughout the Master programme, project work, articles published internationally, participation in international events, a.s.o.




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***"Learning Organisation" characteristics***

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In an attempt at exploring whether there are similarities between the characteristics of this interdisciplinary Research and Teacher Education Master and the "learning organisation" dimensions listed by Pedler et al. (1991), we have compared the above aspects with the "learning organisation" features, using for this purpose the grouping into clusters illustrated diagrammatically in the first section of the article. The programme features listed below reflect syntetically feedback gathered in a

variety of forms (as indicated above), as well as self-evaluation exercises carried out by the co-ordination team.

“Learning Organisation” features	Features of the learning environment provided by the Interdisciplinary Research and Teacher Education Master Programme
<p><b>LEARNING</b></p> <p>⇒ a learning approach to strategy</p> <p>⇒ learning climate</p> <p>⇒ self-development</p> <p>⇒ inter-company learning</p> <p>⇒ formative accounting and control</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ the management’s commitment to development - strategic planning, investing time and resources in the development programme, creating systems for more effective and targeted professional development for teachers/academics within the university</li> <li>▪ creating self-development opportunities for all – ensuring fair access to training and development, to resources and other facilities, setting the basis for a system of work-related learning</li> <li>▪ everyone’s positive attitude to learning, positive atmosphere, friendly, supportive team relations, conducive to sharing and self-development</li> <li>▪ benchmarking, learning e.g. from leading research universities abroad through professional interactions with visiting professors representing them; from quality assurance organisations in the field of language education - the European Association EAQUALS, the Romanian Association QUEST; transferring quality assurance and self-assessment concepts, instruments and procedures developed within the framework of the Council of Europe - e.g. the "QualiTraining" project (Muresan et al., 2007), the <i>European Language Portfolio</i> (EAQUALS-ALTE, 2000), etc.; transferring expertise brought into the programme by the participants, through their contacts with other organisations and project partners</li> <li>▪ transparent implementation processes, involving staff members in the administrative aspects of programme design and unfolding, including budgeting, financial reporting, liaising with administrative departments within the university; involving participants in on-going evaluation of the Master programme, including self-evaluation exercises, and flexible monitoring of developments.</li> </ul>

<b>PARTICIPATION</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ involving academic staff on the teaching team and participants in the Master programme in decision-making and the planning of specific activities, using self-evaluation for the purpose of better identifying professional development needs and interests</li> <li>▪ complex internal sharing, mentoring, learning from each other, comprehensive system of classroom observation, of peer work on academic and practice-oriented activities, using interdisciplinary project work in teams as development opportunities for all</li> <li>▪ encouraging all the tutors and MA participants getting in contact with other organisations and project partners to bring information and new ideas</li> <li>▪ consolidating internal structures for academic sustainability of the development process;</li> <li>▪ enabling the individual's consolidation of internal systems for continuing self-development also after graduating from this Master Programme</li> </ul>
⇒ participative policy making –	
⇒ internal exchanges	
⇒ “boundary workers	
⇒ enabling structures	

<b>COMMUNICATION</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ information sharing, channels of communication</li> <li>▪ ensuring fair access to information and resources</li> <li>▪ preoccupation for continuous improvement of communication effectiveness (as an integral part of customer care)</li> <li>▪ use of modern technology</li> <li>▪ enriching the academic/teaching team with former Master students/participants in the programme, according to their expertise and interest in specific modules</li> <li>▪ complex cross-disciplinary learning</li> </ul>
⇒ participative policy making	
⇒ Internal exchanges	
⇒ “informating”	
⇒ inter-company learning	
⇒ learning & communication climate	

As we can see, some "learning organisation" characteristics are more visible in our academic context, especially on the *learning* side, as they are in line with the priorities and core-processes focused on through the programme. Features such as "formative accounting and control" have involved a steep learning curve for the

academic coordinators of the Master programme and on-going familiarisation with administrative aspects is still work in progress.

Given the specificity of this Research and Teacher Education Master, other dimensions - such as "enabling structures" and "informating" - are present to a certain extent, but have been less focused on, either because they are dealt with in other departments of the wider university context or because they were not perceived as key-priorities in the initial stages.

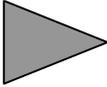
At the same time, there are additional aspects worthwhile mentioning, as they contribute to the programme's added value. Some of these dimensions are briefly presented below.

*Learning* within this programme goes beyond individual learning and institutional learning in "learning organisation" terms. As most of the participants are teachers/academics, they play a key-role as multipliers, generating cascading processes in their own teaching context. They act as agents of change in terms of introducing new approaches to teaching and familiarising students with various research methods.

The purposeful focus on a communicative methodological approach, encouraging sharing, work in project teams, class observation beyond subject defined boundaries, all this contributes to interdisciplinary learning from each other and a culture of sharing. It also consolidates professional partnerships across disciplines, which continue beyond the programme framework. Evidence of this includes joint participations in international conferences and projects, co-operation in various forms, initiated through and during the programme, but continuing and taken further also afterwards.

Through their teacher/multiplier roles, the participants facilitate similar methodological approaches in their activities with students, developing critical thinking, encouraging creativity and an entrepreneurial spirit, as well as the development of advanced communication skills, which will be a plus in the students' career development, as well.

An added value is also the participants' enjoying to take the challenge (a) of exploring new aspects, e.g. with a focus on teaching or research methodology, and (b) of doing things differently, experimenting with new research methods and approaching their specialisation from new angles, thus discovering new dimensions of phenomena in their own domain. Evidence for this includes the graduates' dissertation projects, as well as publications triggered by their participation in this programme.



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### *The way forward*

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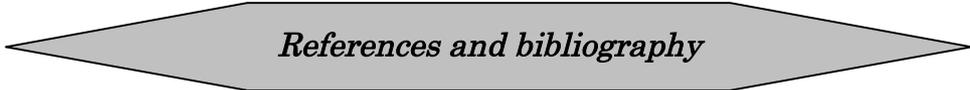
Based on experience so far and the pool of expertise developed, one of the ways forward is to focus more on enabling structures, to ensure the programme's sustainability also in financial terms. Further developments could include targeted PR work, so as to give it more visibility and to promote it more also outside the university - as, at the moment, to our knowledge, it is the first interdisciplinary Research and Teacher Education Master of this type in Romania.

Linked with sustainability but also with further benchmarking, this interdisciplinary community' of tutors and participants in the Master programme could design successful project proposals, to extend the network and enhance sharing opportunities both at national and at European level. Such an application has already been prepared, for participation in a European LLL-project, to start in the autumn of 2009, if accepted for funding.

And last but not least, an important contribution to the programme's continuous success would be to formalise and extend the impact study, which would reduce also the limitations due to the monitoring of the evaluation process by the programme co-ordinators. Further work on enhancing the programme's "learning organisation" dimensions would ensure its viability and capacity for flexible adjustment to emerging institutional and individual needs and interests. At the same time, it could become an example of best practice to be multiplied in innovative ways also in other professional settings.

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