



eLEARNIG INITIATIVE

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Peer Review Network Applying Intelligence to Social Work Education

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Executive summary

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Partner: University of Pitești

<http://www.upit.ro/>

ORGANIZATION

The University of Pitesti [UP] is a medium sized Higher Education Institution for Romania. The University's highest leading board is the University Senate. UP is managed by the Rector together with 4 Vice-Rectors and 1 Chancellor who coordinate 6 committees and councils: Council of Administration, Academic College, College of Ethics, Scientific Council, Council for Social Problem of the Students and for Protection of Labor, Council for Didactic Activity, Evaluation & Assessment, Certification. UP consists of 10 faculties, coordinated by 10 deans, 53 departments in faculties and also centralized departments, such as the Departments for International Relations and European Integration, Curricular Marketing, etc. UP provides 50 university specializations and 24 master programs. The university hosts about 17,153 students and approximately 800 administrative and teaching staff.

Aims: To develop and promote high quality activities of teaching, training and scientific research with the view to creating specialists in various fields, capable of finding jobs within the labour market in Romania and in Europe.

Teaching/Training Activities: UP delivers a large range of diplomas, providing higher education for different fields and domains. Thus, in the faculties of our university we perform training and teaching activities for teaching staff in secondary and post-secondary, education, researchers and specialists in sciences, linguistics, engineering, social assistance, and specialists in finance and management. We provide research opportunities supported by laboratories, study centres as well as a fully equipped, modern library.

Supporting Activities: UP is part of a large regional network of collaborators who participate actively in the social and economic life of the city, county, and region. It works closely with local industry and scientific research institutions, as well as with social welfare and educational organizations including the school inspectorate, department for child protection and county hospitals. UP is actively involved in many European Union projects focused on life long learning, e-Learning, international development, etc.

Project Role: In the PRAISE project, UP has worked as a pedagogical partner defining the concept of virtuous circles and working on the PRAISE study of the characteristics of project formative modules.

Local experience – University of Pitești

Introduction

This chapter describes the different aspects of the development, process and results achieved by the University of Pitești [UP] virtuous circle. The chapter starts with a brief picture of the social and economic context in Romania and the role of the University in regional development.

The experience of the project team in forming the virtuous circle, developing the methodology for the production of the cases, and producing a training module for a large group of professionals in the region, is described in detail. The project has had a significant impact within the University and throughout the region. A particular achievement has been the multi-agency participation in the circle and the design and delivery of multidisciplinary training in an important and challenging social field in Romania.

Local context

Within the project context, the UP is one of the pedagogical partners.

The Romanian economy has made efforts to establish a market economy since 1989. Although in the beginning the economic restructuring moved slowly, now the current Government is committed to economic restructuring and stabilisation, while combating poverty and increasing public spending, including spending on education and training.

The PHARE VET [Vocational Education and Training] Reform project, which was completed in 1998, has prepared a framework in which the Romanian economy and educational system can be better aligned with EU standards.

UP is a higher education institution founded in 1962. It is a state university, located in a heavily industrialised region of Romania in the city of Pitești, 114 kilometres North-West of Bucharest. Initially it was a Pedagogical Institute of Higher Education, but it has had strong development and growth, thus today it is known as one of the strongest universities in Romania, with an almost complete range of faculties within its organizational structure.

UP is part of a large regional network of collaborators who participate actively in the social and economic life of the city, county, and region. Thus the University works closely with local industry and scientific research institutions, as well as with social welfare and educational organizations including the school inspectorate, department for child protection, and county hospitals.

The University comprises 10 faculties offering long-term degree studies of 4 and 5 years; it has more than 1,200 people working as teaching staff and administrative personnel, and approximately 17,000 students. There are a number of specialised departments offering ICT and ODL courses, courses for upgrading the skills of the pre-university teaching staff, continuing training, and other specialized services including development of international relations and European integration.

Among these departments, the Department for European Integration [DIE] played an important role within the this project, as it assured all the necessary links inside and outside the UP for achieving the project's objectives.

UP personnel represent highly professional staff, well prepared for their specific fields of expertise but also experienced in international cooperation and research, leading or being involved in a great number of international projects and contracts.

UP Role in the PRAISE Project

We were motivated to join the project because Romania is an accession country and it is important for us to keep up to date with the latest developments in ICT and ODL training. We are adjusting our educational systems to European standards and it important for us to incorporate the EC requirements concerning the qualifications for social workers. We are committed to the development of elearning tools to support the educational operators in providing flexible and accessible education in pre-qualification courses and post qualification training.

The Romanian educational system is going through tremendous changes, innovations and adaptations. Information and examples of good practice are welcome, especially if previously tested and validated at a European level. Working with European experts and professionals is beneficial for the practices, methodologies and techniques in the social field in Romania.

The University was also in a good position to contribute to the project. It has successfully developed some virtual learning spaces providing services in the field of education and training.

UP provides a strong educational support for the SMEs in the Pitești region for solving their economical, technological or management problems. In collaboration with the Ministry for Education and Research, UP represents a strong dissemination factor at local, regional and national level for the project's findings within Romania.

As UP is a very well placed university, in an important economic area, it was thus well placed to implement and to promote the project and assure the objectives were achieved. Also, because of its high quality staff and its own institutional framework, it acts as a macro-laboratory in which the outcomes of the project can be tested.

The multiple external co-operations carried out through programs such as TEMPUS, SOCRATES and other bilateral programs, have helped the teachers of UP to better understand the realities of EU systems. This local knowledge base, in the context of national developments, ensured that the University was well placed to make a significant contribution to the PRAISE project.

Development of the virtuous circle

UP formed a local project team for implementing and managing PRAISE activities. In order to form the team, the DIE disseminated information about the project within all UP faculties and departments by sending written announcements, by distributing posters and by posting information about project on the departmental Webpage. Thus, DIE announced the date of an initial meeting and invited teaching staff to join the local project team, selected by matching their specializations and expertise as well as their potential professional interests with the project philosophy, aims and targets.

At the initial meeting the project was introduced and the aims, objectives, work plans, outcomes and timetable discussed. A team of 10 members was formed, with team members having different educational backgrounds, ranging from psychologists, pedagogues, experts in ICT, through to foreign languages and administration. The variety of experiences and expertise they held assured the success of the project's implementation within UP and the region.

During the first team meeting, in the framework of the project's presentation, it was emphasized that it was essential for the project team to contribute case studies in specific fields for the database in the planned VLE. We explained that these case studies were to be designed for social workers of different levels and specialties (social assistants, trainers, sociologists, psychologists, and accompanying personnel) and were to be integrated within the learning modules to be developed during the

project lifetime .We discussed how to build the Romanian VC [virtuous circle] and also the strategy for producing the case studies. We decided that the VC would be panel of experts who would coordinate the production of the case studies and moderate the quality of case studies produced.

Membership of the circle

After this first team meeting, a number of institutions and organizations were contacted as potential members of the VC. Institutions and organizations were selected that were felt would have real potential as members of the circle, based on their field of activity (social protection and child care were prioritized), the personnel and their expertise, their expressed commitment to the project and their promptness in responding to our request. They were invited to a first meeting where the VC was explained. The circle created comprised 35 people representing the following institutions:

1. UP¹;
2. Argeş County Agency for Labour Force Occupancy;
3. Group for Action against Drugs;
4. General Direction for the Protection of Child Rights, Argeş County Branch;
5. School Inspectorate of the Argeş County;
6. Junimea Association²;
7. Orphanage no. 8, Trivale;
8. Ion C. Brătianu High School, Piteşti;
9. Industrial High School no. 8, Piteşti;
10. School no. 3, Piteşti;
11. Romanian Association of Children with physical handicaps, Argeş Branch;
12. Pro-Amiciția Association, Piteşti.³

¹ The following UP departments were represented: Teaching Staff Training Department, Office for Psycho-pedagogical Counseling, Cabinet of Physiotherapy & Kinesi-therapy, Department of Social Assistance, International Relations Office, Department for European Integration, Department of Journalism, Continuing Training Department

² This is an association of young people which develops cultural activities and other types of actions for community development.

Members of the VC were motivated to take part for a variety of reasons. Many had previously collaborated with the University. They were all interested in the project theme and goal and were active in the field of child welfare. The opportunity to work on an EU project and to work with a transnational team was very attractive. They were also keen to benefit from the project results and to improve the situation of the target group in the city where they live and work.

At the second meeting of the circle it was decided which organizations would produce the case studies and the methodology for collecting the case studies was developed. We identified who would be responsible for facilitating the production of the case studies and we trained them in order to be able to properly explain to the social operators the narrative method and the case study structure.

After the VC had collected the first three case studies they were moderated within the VC and another meeting was organized to present the results. This was an important phase in the VC understanding of the project because; when the VC discussed case studies at a project partnership meeting that took place around this time it was realized that the case studies produced were a general presentation of the actual stage in social care for these particular fields. This did not fit the project objectives that the case studies should be real cases identified at a local level, describing not only critical problems or instances of practice, but also solutions and remedies.

Thus, we started working on new case studies and organized a fourth VC meeting to analyze and debate the final form of case studies. The four new case studies were placed on the project database after deleting the original three. After this initial experimentation, an efficient working method was developed for the VC and 22 case studies were produced altogether.

Process

At regular VC meetings, the participants were gathered into a large hall, usually the University Council Hall, which had a large oval table with sufficient seating. Both a pc and data projector were provided, as well as flipcharts and markers to assist in discussions. There would be some 20 persons at such meetings.

³ A collaborative association of young pupils and teachers performing joint actions in cooperation with similar associations from France and other European countries in various fields; their aim is to support and facilitate Romanian integration within the EU.

At the beginning of the session, the agenda would be announced and the narration presenters would inform the meeting about their case studies and how they wished to present them to the VC. Each social worker who agreed to present a case study was allocated 10 to 15 minutes of VC time for their presentation. The VC would accept or reject each case study in a serial fashion. This decision was based on how representative the narration was for the formative needs and domains identified for the VC, the case study impact upon the target group, and on the internal consistency of the case study.

However, this only represented the preliminary selection phase. After selecting several narrations, totaling three to four per session, the VC would refine and adjust the selected case studies through participative discussions. In these deliberations, the case studies strengths and weaknesses, according to the VC, were highlighted, and whether it could constitute an example of good practice for the social field. Narrations were also selected which supported learning from experience of situations which went wrong.

The VC members then redrafted both the narration content and syntax, making sure the important aspects were clear. The next step was to assure the connections between initial conditions, the occurrence of the problem, and the solution or remedy were clear. During these phases debates and discussion took place in which all the VC members could express their opinions and bring their expertise to the design and final format of the case study. In the end, the whole narration was synthetically structured according to a framework consisting of scene, actors, actions, reactions, time and space, aim, context and English key words; then the case study was ready for inclusion in the database. In the following table a sample of three case studies is summarized, illustrating the development of practice and learning themes.

Case study	Key concepts	Practice themes	Learning themes
		Could include practice knowledge or unknowledge; informing practice; reforming practice; organizational context	Theoretical and/or research work applied; relevance to learning; module development
Pupils and problems: what to do?	School absences, inappropriate behavior, school administrations, teachers, pupil, parents.	Discussing/analysing the situation or crisis <i>together</i> with the child, without avoidance, hiding or postponement; involving family in taking measures; explaining to the child the effects and impact of disordered affective and sexual life; involving school in supporting the child recovering from all points of	Communicating skills (verbal and non-verbal); identifying problem/crisis based on external signs (behavioural signs); acquiring theoretical patterns in crisis handling;

		view.	
Drugs are destroying lives	Toxicomania, syringe, heroine, injected, psychological distress and disorder	Assessing the child's best interest; gaining trust from the child within the family; listening to child's desires; taking immediate measures for the child's benefit; assuring a healthy mental climate at home for the child.	Assessing risks in complex crisis contexts; understanding how childhood trauma could put its fingerprint on the juvenile age; knowing the measures for intervention for protection, remediation, and treatment with the aim of rehabilitation.
Painful truths	Toxicomania, psychotherapy, disintoxication	Applying social re-integration schemes and strategies; moderating crisis between adoptive parents and teenager in difficulty; combining psychotherapy with affective work in surpassing the crisis and accepting the truth/reality as it is.	Understanding children's trauma of being abandoned and then adopted; knowing about and mastering teenager psychology; dealing with combined crisis situations, generated by both psychological trauma and drug abuse.

Table 1: **Summary of three case studies: practice and learning themes**

The VC encountered some problems. Communication within the VC was hampered by a delay in finding answers to questions, e.g. needing to return to the European PRAISE level for more information about a project methodology. There was an initial learning curve for VC members to understand the project terminology and concepts. There was difficulty in handling feedback from the VC members, since there was a great deal of it and it needed to be structured to allow the VC to benefit. Additionally, there were difficulties in establishing regular meetings due to the VC members' busy schedules.

Initial debates around the concept of the case study itself were interesting and resulted in an agreed case study process of eight steps:

1. Reconstitution of events;
2. Collecting the data;
3. Processing and interpreting the data;
4. Fact diagnosis;
5. Establishing the causes, the interdependencies and the effects of multi-level conflicts represented in the case study;
6. Forecasting future evolutions of scenarios;
7. Formatting conclusions;
8. Enhancing the value of case studies to generalize the good practice into a wider social educational domain.

In conclusion, the VC was evaluated to have worked well in that:

- The circle met each month for the duration of the project;
- The circle comprised 12 different organizations and 35 members;
- Although the membership fluctuated, participating institutions were always represented and participants were well informed and well prepared;
- Representatives of the institutions composing the circle acted like vectors in their organization and disseminated relevant information;

Formative needs and formative module

Based on the results obtained in collecting and refining case studies, UP designed a training module which was piloted with a target group of 20 students from the university; following the project evaluation and modification, it is intended to further test this module with a larger group of up to 50 professionals from the different social welfare agencies.

The training module focuses on the topics of drugs and has the provisional title *Modern society facing the drug problem*. This topic was chosen as all the involved agencies were concerned about the risks to young people from illegal drug use and the subsequent risk of adverse effects from drug abuse. Many involved professionals felt that they needed to increase their knowledge and skill set in preventions, treatments and rehabilitation. More and more children and young people in Romania are experimenting with drugs. There are national and regional reports in Romanian high schools which raise warnings about youth drug abuse. Children and young people are more likely to abuse drugs if they lack accurate information and if they are not properly educated concerning the dangers of illegal drug use. For these reasons schools must take measures to properly inform pupils and parents and agency personnel also need additional training in how to develop actions which help to decrease drug abuse.

In the city of Pitesti, police, magistracy (prosecuting), medical personnel in the hospitals, school inspectorates and many other organizations working to combat drug misuse have reported an increased use of hallucinogen substances in the Arges County based on investigations and inquiries performed mainly in schools. UP has a *Cabinet for Counseling and Psychological Testing* which provides official records and statistics on the existing situation in Argeş County in the field of working with persons abusing drugs. It includes information about existing opportunities for specialized training targeted at educators, parents, social workers and specialists, e.g. doctors, psychologists, etc. The data collected reflected the need for further training, since there was an increase in cases and there was an identified need for additional training for professionals.

Through the offices of the Cabinet, the following organizations were given a questionnaire targeted at the relevant employees concerning their training needs:

- Argeş County School Inspectorate⁴
- Argeş County Social Workers working in the regional county hospital and the regional pediatric hospital;
- Argeş Prefecture Department for Child Protection;
- Argeş County Council Commission for Child Protection;
- Association of Fighting against Drugs;
- Argeş County Police Inspectorate.

The responses obtained revealed a clear necessity for education and training and also for updated information concerning child psychology, drug prevention, and on how to respond to drug abusers.

The pilot module developed in response to these training needs had a number of components. It included a presentation of the PRAISE project which focused upon the chosen learning methodology and about the VLE. There was also an introduction about social work activity in general. Child and adolescent psychology was covered, as were methods of prevention of drug abuse amongst minors. Another component dealt with the methodologies for working with minors who use drugs, including aspects on medical treatment, support for social reintegration at different levels (school, family, friends, civil society) as well as how to prevent relapse. Finally, a presentation of the case studies which were related to these formative needs was given which covered aspects of analysis, discussion, debates, and possible/alternative solutions.

In addition to providing the module to the target groups as described, information about the modules was disseminated widely in the field of social care in the city and in the region, in order to attract additional interested people and to garner their opinions and new ideas. Thus will we be able to extend and improve the module content and to further disseminate good practices in the field.

Teaching methods employed in the delivery of the module included a traditional combination of face-to-face lecture and small group teaching, role play, questioning, and team-work. In addition there were appropriate online materials that could be accessed during face to face contacts and could be accessed by students at their own pace for self study. Module duration was 30 hours delivered intensively over four

⁴ This agency covers all kindergartens, elementary schools, high schools, and schools for children with special needs.

weekends in a single month. A team of six lecturers was responsible for delivery of the module.

The learners in each phase of the module delivery and testing were as follows:

1. for the initial phase of testing, students of the UP
2. for the final testing, social operators working with minors, teachers, doctors, members of public organizations and NGOs acting in the drug prevention.

Results, impact and benefits from applying the PRAISE methodology

At the local level:

- Improved the knowledge and abilities of the students and teaching staff of the University of Pitești;
- Involved the staff in transnational cooperation in a direct and efficient way;
- Led to multicultural and multidisciplinary team work;
- Allowed members to learn about good practice in other European countries;
- VC members took part in exchanging information, knowledge and positive experiences;
- Led to identification of training needs, acute problems and solutions in health and social care systems and social care education;
- Led to better collective understanding of realities in the local fields of health and social care;
- Developed educational tools aimed at developing educational sectors;
- Allowed for end user testing and evaluation of ICT / ODL educational products designed for the social field;
- Helped to maintain and improve the UP profile in the region.

At the regional level:

- Helped to improve the quality of regional social care education;
 - Increased the number of training courses offered through ICT and ODL by UP;
 - Helped to create a more effective regional collaboration amongst the social and educational providers involved;
 - Led to better preparation and training for social workers and other social welfare staff in the region of Argeș County;
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- Helped to improve the quality of service through the sharing of good practice and professional development of involved social care members.
- Helped to increase the human resource efficiency for Argeş regional social workers by allocating them specific courses;
- Led to a reduction in costs for effective training through the use of ODL techniques;
- Created the opportunity for sustainable development of similar training initiatives;
- Set a precedent for the design and development of future health and social care training systems with ICT and ODL methodologies;
- Attracted EU funding for sustainable regional developments.

And at the national level:

- Led to an infusion of modern tools and educational methodologies for social protection, based on sound ICT and ODL principles;
 - Helped to generalize good practice and social care education results at a national level and thus affect positive change;
 - Raised the public awareness and professionals' awareness of developments in practice and educational initiatives in the social care and educational fields;
 - Offered solutions for identified needs and problems;
 - Offered a comparison of Romanian realities with those of other accession countries and thus helped to obtain a more accurate image of Romania's position in the course of joining the EU;
 - Helped to better prepare Romania to join the EU in 2007 by synchronizing practice and standards to EU countries.
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