Course innovation in business higher education – A case study of a BA Commerce and Marketing course

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Abstract

This paper explores the dynamic landscape of higher education, specifically in the domain of Commerce and Marketing, over the past decade. As higher education faces evolving challenges and changing stakeholder expectations, the study delves into the ongoing debate regarding the alignment of higher education, including business education on a Commerce and Marketing BA course in West-Hungary. The research employs a comprehensive case study methodology spanning ten academic years to showcase the course's development and innovations. The study scrutinizes changes in teaching methodologies, course materials, seminar and project assignments, applied technologies, and assessment methods. Findings from in-depth interviews with business professionals, and student observations reveal the course's adaptation to market needs and challenges encountered during the online transition. The results suggest that, despite disruptions in the academic year 20/21 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the development of this course in the examined years successfully aligns with market expectations, fostering competencies essential for the business domain, thanks to introducing new methodologies (interactive project-based, seminars), usage of AI assisted applications, and introducing new forms of assessments.

Keywords: Higher education; business education; course development, course innovation.

1. Introduction

In recent decades, higher education, like many other fields, has undergone significant change and faced many challenges (Murphy, 2013). The expectations of stakeholders (students, teachers, parents, business) have also changed significantly, but not necessarily in the same direction (Sander et al., 2000; Wardley et al. 2013., Borghi et. al 2016). The extent to which higher education, including economics education, meets the needs of the labour market is a long-standing debate. The needs of the latter, even directly at the local level, indirectly influence

the expectations of both parents and students towards higher education (Mainardes et. al 2012; Davies, 2002, Remmik et al., 2022). These expectations have to be met, albeit with a time lag, by education and teachers.

2. Course development

The technological, economic, social and political changes of the last decade or two have posed a major challenge to higher education professionals, as these changes have become increasingly rapid and far-reaching (Nurhas et. al, 2022). Technological change, for example, not only affects the methodology of education, but is also transforming the needs and life of society to such an extent that it has an inescapable impact on all aspects of life, and is therefore affecting education from many angles (Ferrel, 2020). These processes can be further accelerated by events such as a pandemic that has increased the pace of the transition to a digital lifestyle and changed its direction and focus (Nurhas et. al, 2022). In higher education, curricula, teaching materials and courses are undergoing significant changes and innovations in response to the changing expectations of both the business sector and students (Guo, 2020). The main driver for the development and evolution of courses is the dynamic change in the world, which affects both expectations and the requirements of practical life (Yulianti, 2020). One of these important changes in the world is the rapid development of technology, which plays a crucial role in the way courses are designed and delivered (Yulianti, 2020), as in many cases traditional course methods no longer meet the needs and expectations of modern learners. As the literature on curricular innovation in higher education highlights, there is a growing recognition that course development is not only about revising course content, but also about paying attention to the way teaching is delivered, to the interaction between students and teachers, and to the design of activities (Bovill, 2020). It is also important to put the learner at the centre of course design and delivery, which includes recognizing the learner as an active and responsible participant in his/her own education (Trinidad, 2020). Another important aspect has recently become collaboration and interdisciplinary approaches. In higher education, there is an increasing emphasis on interdisciplinary and possibly interdepartmental collaboration in course development. The aim of this interdisciplinary approach is to provide students with a comprehensive education and to tackle complex real-world problems that require multiple perspectives. Continuous innovation and adaptation are required in course design and delivery to keep pace with the rapidly changing educational environment. The main areas for this are the use of new pedagogical techniques in content delivery; new teaching methods (e.g., project-based teaching, task-based teaching) (Guo, 2020), the incorporation of experiential learning opportunities, the incorporation of new technology into teaching (Greenhow, 2020), the incorporation of new assessment methods which may indicate a move away from examinations towards practice-oriented assessment.

3. Case study of a Commerce and Marketing BA course

The aim of the study is to analyze the degree of innovation in a bachelor course of Commerce and Marketing and the degree of involvement and satisfaction of the students at a university in West-Hungary in the last ten years.

3.1. Research methodology

This case study illustrates the introduction of innovations through experimental signals. The methodological approach employed in this research is comprehensive, aiming for an in-depth exploration of the topic. Student observation serves as the primary research tool, with the researcher actively engaging in the learning process to observe students' behavior and reactions in the classroom. The observations span three academic years (2016/2017, 2020/2021, 2023/2024). Criteria for observation vary across phases: during the first phase, encompassing the initial contact hour, key factors include student reactions to requirements, course methodology, activity in the first assignment, and the quantity and quality of comments. The second phase involves observing students during a mid-year seminar, focusing on their activity levels, the quality and quantity of questions, comments, and overall mood. The third phase occurs during the presentation of business plans, with observations centered on students' participation rates, activity levels, and personal reactions following the presentation of their results. Additionally, in-depth interviews (n=16) were conducted with four business professionals every second year to glean insights into company expectations and practices. Throughout the duration of the course, the business professionals were actively engaged as mentors and adjudicators during the end-of-semester presentations and subsequent presentation competitions. At the end of each semester, interviews were administered biennially, conducted in person on an individual basis. The interviews encompassed an assessment of the course methodology and delivery, alongside an evaluation of students' performance, acquisition of knowledge, skills, and competencies.

3.2. The course and its challenges

Due to the strategic importance of continuous innovation in education and responding to the changing expectations of the environment in the university under study, several changes have been introduced in the curriculum of the Commerce and Marketing BA programme of the last decade. The course under study is "Management, Organisation and Leadership of Commercial Enterprises", which is in the penultimate semester of the students' programme (not counting the practical semester) in their sample curriculum. For all but one year of the past decade, the course has been a compulsory subject for undergraduate and postgraduate students. What has not changed is that the course consists of lectures and seminars. Before 2010, the lack of a textbook in Hungarian had been a difficulty, but the continuous updating of the textbook by the author has solved this problem.

Over the past decade, the development of the course has encountered numerous challenges requiring careful consideration. Firstly, there has been a noteworthy shift in the funding structure of economics education, transitioning from public financing to self-sustainability. This change has substantially reduced publicly funded positions in higher education institutions specializing in business and economics. Secondly, alterations in student demographics have ensued, with the disappearance of Hungarian students residing beyond borders, resulting in a student body predominantly sourced from within an eighty-kilometer radius of the university. Thirdly, the ubiquitous integration of new technologies across various aspects of life has elevated expectations from both businesses and students, necessitating competencies in their utilization by the conclusion of their educational journey. Fourthly, evolving labor market expectations now demand graduates to possess practical, project-oriented approaches, interdisciplinary knowledge, and effective teamwork skills. Lastly, reflecting these transformations, student expectations have shifted towards modernized course materials and teaching methodologies. Notably, the rapid acceleration of course development was catalyzed by the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, leading to the widespread adoption of online teaching in the academic year 20/21, further amplified by the introduction of AI-based programs and applications in the subsequent academic year 23/24.

3.3. Steps of course development

In the realm of educational advancement and innovation, this paper focuses on the systematic evolution of course development over consecutive academic years. The progression is delineated in Table 1, where each column corresponds to a distinct academic year. Notably, the table highlights the incremental introduction of novel methodologies, technologies and assessment used in the class, with each progressive step boldly demarcated. In terms of teaching methodology, the course has undergone major changes over the past decade. It has gradually evolved from frontal teaching to interactive, project-based one, in which students work on a large project (a business plan) during the semester and solve related short tasks in seminars to help them implement it. The course material was supplemented with online materials and videos, and over the years students became more and more involved in the teaching-learning process, taking an active part in the design of the lessons.

As their attention has become less and less engaged, the lessons have become "fragmented", with the processing of the course material being continuously supplemented by illustrative videos, games, interactive digital-based forms of assessment and feedback. In class assignments, longer case studies have been replaced by short, project-based interactive exercises, which are now expected to be carried out using AI-based applications in the 23/24 academic year. The final product of the course, whereas previously a text-based business plan, now requires the submission of a video presenting the business plan and project background materials. Evaluation has also undergone a number of changes, with the initial instructor-led individual evaluation

being replaced by a group-level project evaluation, which takes place in a one-day workshop involving academic and business professionals.

Table 1. Methodological development of course "Management, Organisation and Leadership of Commercial Enterprises" Source: own compilation

Academic year	Educational methodology	Course material	Seminar Assignments	Project assignments	Applied technologies, games, softwares	Assessment
2014/15	frontal teaching	book, lecture slides	calculation	no project task	no applied technology	written exam
2015/16	frontal lectures, **interactive seminars**	book, lecture slides	**case studies with calculation**	**written business plan**	no applied technology	**oral exam**
2016/17	frontal lectures, interactive seminars	book, lecture slides	**simulation**	written business plan and presentations	**jeopardy game on last lecture**	**professional jury**, oral exam
2017/18	frontal lectures, interactive seminars	book, lecture slides, **studies**	simulation	written business plan and presentations	jeopardy game on last lecture	oral exam
2018/19	frontal lectures, interactive seminars	book, lecture slides, studies	short assignments with calculation	written business plan and presentations	jeopardy game and **Kahoot quiz on lectures**	**written exam**
2019/20	frontal lectures, interactive seminars	book, lecture slides, studies	short assignments with calculation	written business plan and presentations	Kahoot quiz on lectures	**presentation for professional jury** written exam
2020/21	**online lectures and seminars (frontal)**	book, lecture slides, studies, videos	online short assignments	**video and a presentation of a business plan**	**online board games** and Kahoot quiz on lectures	**online presentation for professional jury, exam**
2021/22	**interactive lectures and seminars**	book, lecture slides, studies, videos	short assignments	**video and a presentation of a business plan**	**online business plan make**r and Kahoot quiz on lectures	presentation for professional jury, **written midterm and endterm test**
2022/23	interactive lectures and **project-based seminars**	book, lecture slides, studies, videos	project assignments	video and background material	**escape room games** and Kahoot quiz on lectures	**video presentation for professional jury**, written midterm and endterm test
2023/24	interactive lectures and project-based seminars	book, lecture slides, studies, videos	**project assignments using AI, content creating**	**video and background material**	**AI based applications (e.g. Dall-E, ChatGPT)**	video presentation for prof. jury, written mid/ endterm test

3.4. Findings

3.4.1. In-depth interviews with business professionals

In-depth interviews were carried out every two years with the same professional experts after the presentation of the student material. Among other things, it was at his suggestion that new forms of assessment and new methods were introduced to reinforce competences and skills in line with market needs. In principle, he was satisfied with the course during each year, but made additions. He suggested developing students' writing skills and their ability to organise and see things in a systematic way at the beginning, then suggested introducing exercises to develop communication, debating and problemsolving skills and teamwork competencies, and then emphasising creativity and the appropriate use of market applications in order to enhance and develop digital/ICT skills and competences. The 23/24 academic year was the first in which the course structure, the examinations, the technologies used, the curriculum and the students' competences met the market's expectations and the business expert did not make any suggestions regarding competence development.

3.4.2. Student observation

In light of the examination findings, notably influenced by the transition to online observation, the outcomes reveal a pronounced divergence, particularly during the academic year 20/21. Across all phases, a discernible decline in activity is evident, accompanied by elevated levels of student dissatisfaction and increased rates of negative comments. This outcome can be attributed to the challenges posed by the online learning environment, wherein interactive lessons were constrained, relying solely on visual and auditory stimuli while lacking the richness of metacommunication and other non-verbal cues. Consequently, students reported lower satisfaction levels, attributing the difficulty in meeting requirements to the constraints of the online format. Despite adaptations to align with online teaching and learning, the desired outcome was not fully realized. Intriguingly, the subsequent academic year witnessed minimal alterations in the requirements, maintaining continuity with the introduction of two quarterly exams (midterm and endterm test) in lieu of the traditional end-of-semester exam, yet retaining the contentious video component that had been subject to student grievances. The outcomes from the initial phase of observation (first seminar lesson) in the academic year 23/24 closely mirrored those observed in the 16/17 academic year. No discernible distinctions were evident in terms of student engagement, the volume and characteristics of comments provided were nearly identical, and on both occasions, students exhibited a shared sense of disillusionment with the course requirements. During the second phase of observation (midyear seminar lesson), a notable divergence between the two academic years, with a preference for 23/24, became evident. Students in the later academic year exhibited significantly higher levels of activity, demonstrated more substantial advancements in the project assignment compared to previous years, and their inquiries during the seminar indicated a markedly deeper understanding of the

course material compared to the 16/17 academic year. The outcomes in the third phase (final presentations of the course) exhibited a blend of results, as one year excelled in certain aspects while the other surpassed in different facets. Attendance rates during the presentations (partially obligatory for students), were very similar. The more recent year showed slightly heightened activity levels, characterized by increased commentary during the presentations and greater involvement from students in preparation of presentations. Nevertheless, in terms of personal reactions, the preceding academic year, 16/17, was deemed superior, with a greater number of students verbally expressing satisfaction with the course.

4. Conclusion

The assessment indicates that by the academic year 23/24, the course development had attained a level aligning with market expectations, cultivating and reinforcing competencies essential for the business domain. On the whole, students expressed satisfaction with the course, except potentially during the initial year of the COVID-19 pandemic, in the academic year 20/21. The heightened dissatisfaction during this period could likely be attributed to the challenges in effectively translating the course's teaching methodology and requirements into the online environment. Despite this, the lack of a substantial increase in overall student satisfaction does not raise significant concerns, as students consistently reported satisfaction each year, meeting their needs to a satisfactory extent. It is noteworthy that students can only gauge the course within their own academic year, limiting their ability to assess potential deterioration or improvement. This assertion is supported by observational results, revealing consistent student satisfaction and active engagement in the course project assignment after the initial seminars.

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