

**THE INTEGRATION OF EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING IN HIGHER EDUCATION
INSTITUTIONS -
AN ASSESSMENT OF THE ROMANIAN UNIVERSITIES**
- Work in progress -

Assoc.prof. Mihaela V. Că răuşan, PhD
Faculty of Public Administration,
National University of Political Studies and Public Administration, Bucharest, Romania

Abstract: *The role of university education in the United Nations Sustainable Agenda has been underlined since 2002 (Johannesburg Plan), and Rio +20 has reinforced the need to develop a partnership with higher education institutions (HEI) to sustain an education and research system that supports local efforts for sustainable growth, and connectivity with public decision makers. At the same time, the OECD offers a new vision in the Education Strategy 2030 and draws attention to some guiding principles on the future of education system and the use of specific elements to the process of experiential learning: Anticipation-Action-Reflection. Moreover, the European Union supports Member States in their efforts to provide education and training for all citizens - "Education for everyone". Considering the manifested interests of the international organisations, in our research we will determine the way in which Romanian educational strategies are aligned with them. Furthermore, starting from the research hypothesis - Romanian HEI are not ready to fulfil the requirements of the future generations, we will do an assessment of the main universities (state and private universities) based on their organisational and educational instruments publicly presented in the admission process for the academic year 2019-2020. The research questions considered are: Which are the non-formal, experiential education instruments used by HEI? Which subjects/disciplines were and/or will be adapted to the use of new technologies and training methods? Have Romanian HEI the academic culture to integrate in the teaching/training system the new technologies, training methods required by future generations? The instruments used to find an answer to all the questions raised within the research are in the same time qualitative – strategies review, structured interviews with professors and managers, and quantitative – assessment of the educational instruments presented in the admission process by Faculties of Public Administration and Management.*

Keywords: *professional and educational competences; accreditation; the new technologies skills; teaching methods.*

Introduction

One of the most time-efficient and cost-efficient ways of delivering higher education is through the traditional lecture-centric curriculum (Karayan and Gathercoal, 2005). However, the lecture-centric approach alone is limited in its ability to meet some of the key goals identified and commonly pursued by higher education institutions (Boyer, 1987). This paper focuses specifically on the experiential learning and particularly important for the research are:

- (1) the competence evaluation in the curricula of HEI;
- (2) the experience learning methods;
- (3) the links between the academic competences (administrative sciences and management) with the 2030 labour market;
- (4) the empower HEI to implement and validate experiential learning.

This paper does not aim to quantify the above mentioned goals, but does attempt to illustrate how important is experiential learning for future jobs, and to observe the degree to which the nowadays competences of administrative sciences and management meets the requirements of 2030 labour market.

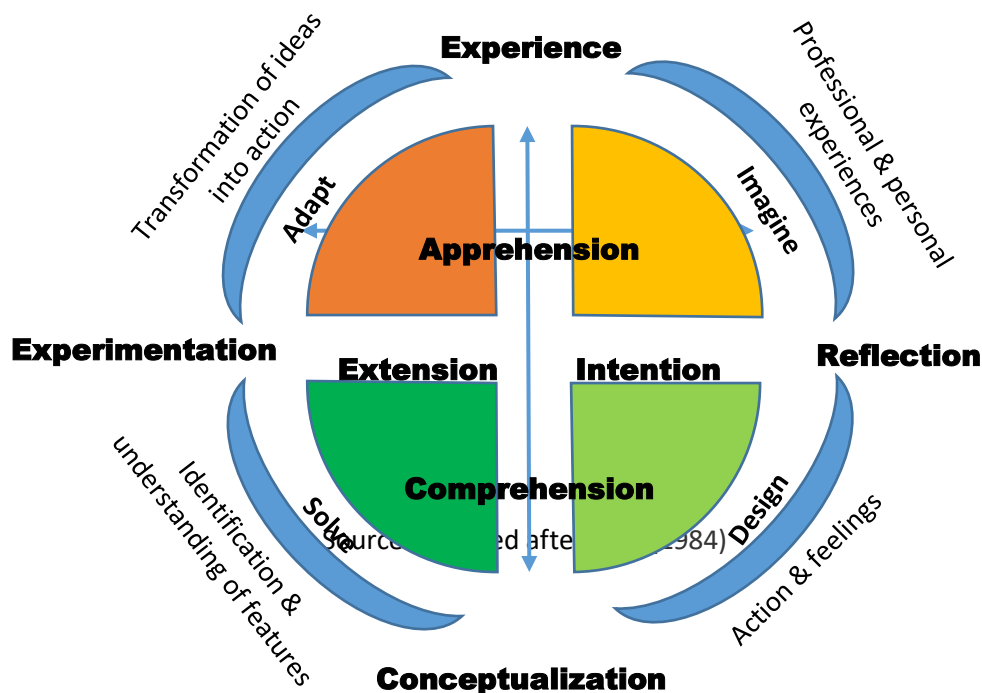
The paper begins with a discussion on the concept of “experiential learning” (Kolb, 1984; Cantor, 1995; Wingfield and Black, 2005) and on the importance of accreditation of it by competent authorities in order to be validated at societal and academic level. This paper attempts to emphasise how experiential learning methods can be used to complement a lecture-centric approach of today HEI.

Experiential Learning Past and Present Concerns

John Dewey (1938), Kurt Lewin (1952) and Jean Piaget (1967), Cantor (1995), Fenwick (2000), Marlin-Bennett (2002), Gosen and Washbush (2004) are among the authors who contributed to the development of the experiential learning. Besides them, the most popular one is David A. Kolb (1984), who established the cycle of experiential learning focused on experience, reflection, conceptualization and action. The four innovative elements are united in grasping and transformative experience (see Figure 1). Kolb considered that a number of factors can influence the learning styles, among them we have identified the ones that higher education institutions (HEI) should take into account: education specialization, career choice, adaptive competences. The learning discovery of Kolb opened the discussion on the traditional lecture-centric learning and increased the awareness of the universities on the market labour demand.

Even if experiential learning is simply defined as learning by doing, in literature was defined as a transformative process - Kolb (1984:38) “the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience” or as an engagement of the education beneficiaries – Cantor (1995:1) “learning activities that engage the learner directly in the phenomena being studied”. Experiential learning is the learning process in which specific adaptive methods are used (experiential learning methods) for acquiring skills, competences or behaviours based on the experience of the learner and not of the teacher/trainer/professor. For this reason, most of the time the person who assists the learning process must act as facilitator, expert, evaluator and coacher in the same time.

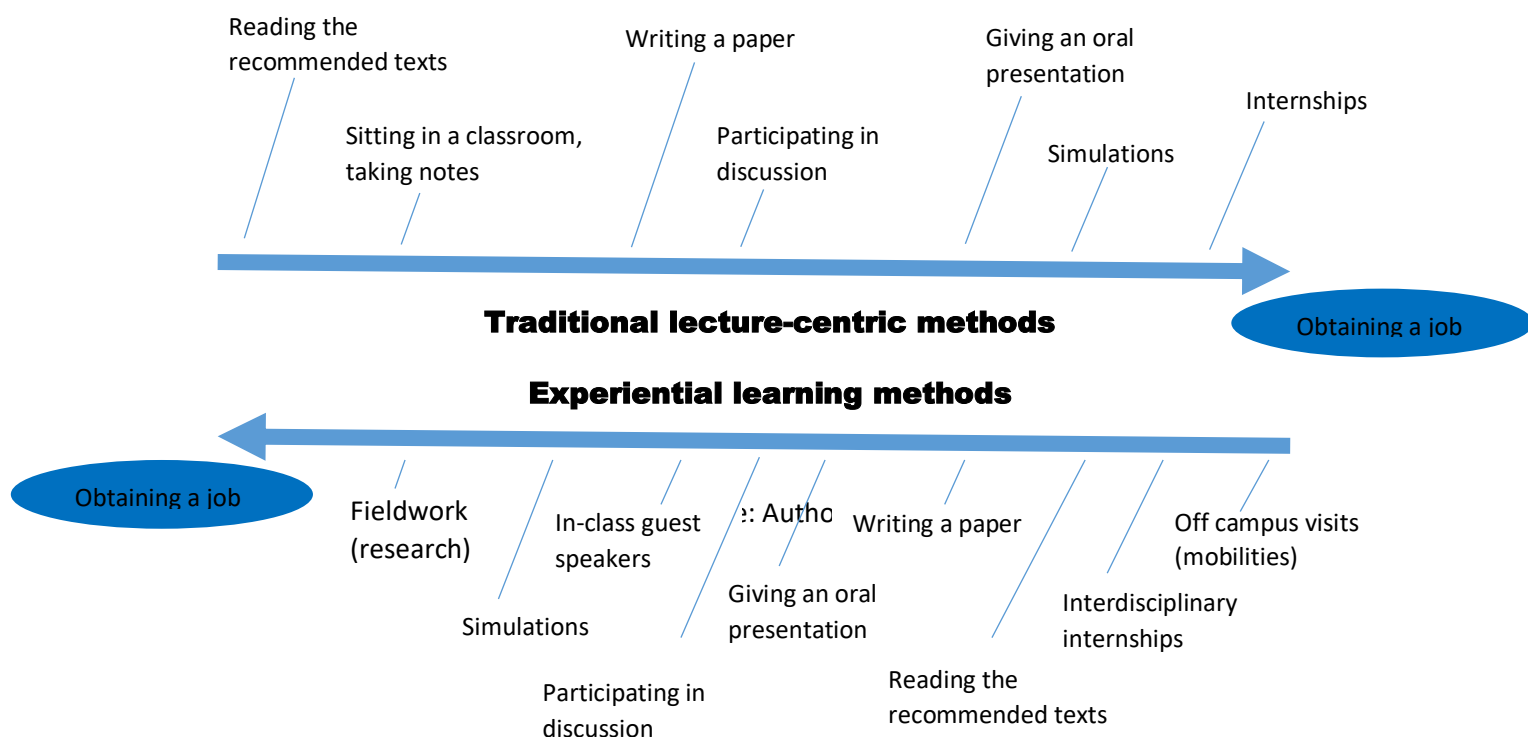
Figure 1
Experiential learning cycle



With experiential learning a wide range of skills and behaviours can be delivered by HEI. The future organisations – the exponential one (Ismail, 2014) – needs people who can apply the experiential learning cycle. Moreover, public administration competences needs to adapt to the new technology requirements, and for doing this HEI should invest more in experiential learning methods. Experiential learning could include field-based coursework, internships, service learning, guest speakers, site visits. We consider that transformational change of either public or private entities can be reached only in a manner that rewards employment experiences.

The new skills ought to be provided by HEI for a better absorption of its alumni on the labour market are not going to be anymore provided only by the research activities (especially those done in front of the computer monitor). The impact of experiential learning in areas such as leadership, change management, virtual, cross functional and cultural teams, organizational effectiveness, goal setting, and time and stress management was well recognised in the last 20 years (Retallick & Steiner, 2009; Domask, 2007). Engagement and promotion of active learning as a context for significant learning, learning that lasts was espoused by Fink (2003) and the obtained results through critically reflective practice (Brookfield, 1995; Silverman and Casazza, 2000) confirm the Kolb's idea on the role of experiential learning in the labour market.

Figure 2. A comparative spectrum of traditional lecture-centric and experiential learning methods



The figure above is not intended to represent all lecture-centric (LC) and experiential learning (EL) methods, but it does represent the similarities and the differences between the two systems and how they complement each other. The “fish bones” representation offers to readers a comparative perspective of the two systems and emphasises the movement in the learning process. In the LC system the learner is always in touch with a professor while in the EL is directly in touch with the studied realities. Keeton and Tate sharpened, since 1978, the contrast between content-story and life experience, between the linear learning and the spirally one based on practice. All the methods mentioned on the linear learning are the most used ones in the subjects’ syllabuses of nine faculties (see Appendix 1 with the list of Universities) from the field of administrative sciences and

management. The most commonly used instruments in the syllabuses are lecture, static presentations (PPT), case study exposure for courses and students presentations, open discussions or simulations of possible situations identified by professors in practice. On the other side, the methods associated with experiential learning process can include non-formal (fish bowl, green card, teatrul de umbre, photo-voice, dezbateri, bees' nest, story-telling etc.), formal (traditional lecture-centric methods, as the ones mentioned above), informal (volunteering activities, seminars/conferences/guest speakers, job shadowing, social media engagement etc.) instruments that can define each one of them depending of the field of study. As Brown (2009:3) mentioned experiential learning "utilize the previous experience to compile document-supported descriptions of learning outcomes acquired from workplace and personal experiences" and so the learner is directly in touch with the realities being studied.

Education system should not be categorised as experiential or not, experiential learning does not remove the traditional lecture-centric education, it just wrap up the process and provide a different approach of the same issue, furthermore obviate the line between theory and practice. Based on the above remarks, the core idea of future HEI is to combine multiple forms of educational approaches, all of which are experiential in one form or another, and to directly expose students to the practitioners in their respective fields through different methods. The students are required to present their study plan and the faculty members will facilitate/assist him/her in the process.

Professional and or vs. Educational Competences

In the European Commission Memorandum of Lifelong Learning (EC, 2000) learning is "valued" in formal, non-formal or informal settings. It is important to note that Lifelong Learning (LLL) encompass also training or preparation for world of work, adaptation, prevention, promotion, maintaining and providing skills, abilities and knowledge necessary to the labour market. Experiential learning is the solution that asses the professional and personal experiences and can bring closer theory and practice, in any field of study.

The lack of clarity in using experiential learning and its contribution to the educational goals is difficult to be proven, also and the quantitative assessments of it is very difficult to be reach in the academic literature

The contribution of experiential learning to educational goals is difficult to prove and quantitative assessments are hard to get by academic literature (Lowenthal and Sosland, 2007; Wingfield and Black, 2005; Gosen and Washbush, 2004). Even so, its importance in the learning process of future generations was emphasised in the OECD Learning Compass 2030. The OECD framework offers a broad vision on the students' future competencies and develops a common language and understanding that is globally relevant and informed.

Jessup's (1991:26) distinction between job competence and professional competence is the one that helps us to better understand "concrete experience" of Kolb. The first refers to the job attributions 'limited to a particular role in a particular company' and the latter refers to the repertoire of skills, abilities, knowledge that a person owns following education and/or experience learning. The necessary steps to implement experiential learning in HEI to reduce the mismatching with the labour market requirements were not yet determined, because the word competence is rather fraught, if inescapable, in the theoretical and academic landscape against which people's experience is recognized, accredited or validated (Pouget & Osborne, 2004:57).

In our research we have noticed that the skills/competences identified as learning outcomes in the Diploma Supplement of fourteen faculties from nine Romanian Universities differ, to some extent, from one to another. Furthermore, we revealed the fact that because of this each faculty has a different degree of capacity to answer to the new requirements of the future employment market. (see in this sense the graphics 1, 2 and 4).

Validation of Experiential Learning in Romanian Higher Education System

Accreditation of experiential learning tools is not possible according to the evaluation criteria of the Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ARACIS). Experiential learning could be better valued at the master or postgraduate studies or at the lifelong-learning (LLL) programs. Accreditation of experiential learning methods carried out by competent authorities is needed for the diplomas assessment, for personal recognition and social legitimization. LLL reflects societal changes of a structural and socio-economic nature, and European (n.a.) / governments' concern about creating a new workforce, able to adapt to rapidly changing work patterns and the demands of a knowledge-based society (Pouget & Osborne, 2004, 60). In an evaluation of the qualitative standards of ARACIS in the field of administrative sciences and management (commissions 5, 6 and 7) we found out that none of them mention non-formal, experiential learning methods, and as we mentioned above, because of this they are not validated as methods/instruments which HEI could use in their curricula design. Going further, we wanted to identify some elements of the Kolb's learning cycle, such as adaptation, design, reflection or experimentation and none of them are mentioned.

Further, an overview of the curricula of the thirteen faculties on administrative sciences and management revealed us that the educational skills/competences, mentioned in the diploma supplement, do not clearly include advanced skills on new technologies, the skills of adaptation or creativity in the decision making process. Based on the research's results presented in graphics (see appendix 2) each faculty reach a different degree of development for each educational skills/competences required by the future employment market. Taking these into account and because we could not clearly identified the elements of Kolb's system, we extended the research to different activities and concepts established based on the causality connection. In this sense, we have identified for advanced skills on new technologies concepts like technologies, data or data bases use; for adaptation we started from the notion, Kolb's one, of transformation of ideas into actions to gain experience and we searched for actions such as evaluation or assessment, and we related creativity with processes like design, development, plan of action or interpretation. Moreover, in our quest to identify also the other two specific competences – reflection and experimentation, which were also not clearly identified, we extended the research for experimentation to synonyms' concepts like analyse, measure, utilization, use, apply and for reflection to observation or point of view. For each concept/action identified in each skill we attributed one point, the gathered score placed the field of study on the radar graphics and based of this we could compare the results (see graphics 3, 4 and 5). We had to extend the research to the mentioned concepts because for example, one of the most common used competence related to new technologies in public administration field of study is: "the ability to use modern informatics technology for editing and processing information and accessing data bases necessary". Because the role of new technologies was emphasised by World Economic Forum (2018), Digital Economy and Society Index Report (2019), PWC report on the Workforce of the Future, shaping 2030 (2019), and all these reports mention Romania as one with a low level of competencies in new technologies we decided to pay more attention to it. 26% of Romanians do not have at least basic digital skills, required in most jobs, 51% of internet Romanian users have no software-related skills and Romania have the lowest ICT usage rates amongst the internet users (2nd lowest-36%).

From all the competences in the two domains, administrative sciences and management, we selected the one on new technologies because is the most practical one and its organisation can be off the campus and based on non-formal or experiential instruments. Besides, on the technical abilities, OECD (2018) mentioned Romania within the countries with a high degree of mismatch between educational competences and job ones (30%). Mismatch that proven to be a real threat for the future of the employment market.

Concluding Remarks

Experiential learning is about experiences in action and not just knowledge. All the Romanian HEI discuss online about the experience of their professors and or practitioners, but not about the methods used, in a review of all admission web pages nobody presents the goals of the education competences. The results obtained within our research do not help us in giving a clear answer to our research question about the readiness of the academic culture to accept the experiential learning methods, in order to develop an entire learning process based on them. Even if we tend to provide a negative answer because there is no requirement of the accreditation agency, in this sense, we prefer to assert this, for the moment, as a research limit. For a substantiated answer to this, we need to study more the professors' feedbacks in these two fields of study.

Experiential learning in Romania, as we already mentioned, faces and will face challenges that are not specific to other educational systems and the use of it will hit the reluctance of professors, who preferred the already knew lecture-centric system in which do not have to invest time in preparing and spending with students off the campus. As we emphasised, in the studied syllabuses, the common used methods are lecture, PPT, case study exposure, students' presentations, open discussion and simulations of possible situations. Even if some of them could be used together with experiential learning methods such as: debates with experts and open discussions with guest speakers or simulations after job shadowing, none of the syllabuses presents them in this way.

The employment market perspective started from the new technology realities and move forward in demanding job competencies that the educational systems do not provide. None of the disciplines use the computer in classes for the learning process, except the IT and the final research project, no wonder why professors told us "the computers' room is closed only the guy from IT has the key" or "the IT professor has its office in the computers' room, so we cannot enter". In the syllabuses all the subjects' requirements are one computer and video-projector for professor's presentation (ppt), white/black board or flipchart and writing instruments. For all these reasons, the high degree of imbalance between the required job competencies and the educational competences will force HEI to act and to pay more attention to the goals they want to accomplish. Moreover, they have to think more on the results – *professional* alumni.

References

- Boyer, D. (1987), *College: The Undergraduate Experience in America*, Harper & Rowe, New York, NY.
- Brookfield, S.D. (1987) *Developing critical thinkers*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Cantor, J.A. (1995), *Experiential Learning in Higher Education: Linking Classroom and Community*, ASHE-ERIC Higher Education Report No. 7.
- Dewey, John. (1938) *Experience and Education*. New York: Macmillan.
- Fenwick, T.J. (2000), "Expanding conceptions of experiential learning: a review of the five contemporary perspectives of cognition", *Adult Education Quarterly*, Vol. 50 No. 4, pp. 243-72.
- Fink, L.D. (2003) *Creating significant learning experiences: An integrated approach to designing college courses*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Gosen, J. and Washbush, J. (2004), "A review of scholarship on assessing experiential learning effectiveness", *Simulation and Gaming*, Vol. 35 No. 2, pp. 270-93.
- Gosen, J. and Washbush, J. (2004), "A review of scholarship on assessing experiential learning effectiveness", *Simulation and Gaming*, Vol. 35 No. 2, pp. 270-93.
- Jessup, G. (1991). *Outcomes: NVQs and the emerging model of education and training*. London: Falmer Press.
- Joseph J. Domask. (2007) *Achieving goals in higher education An experiential approach to sustainability studies*, *International Journal of Sustainability in Higher Education*, Vol. 8 No. 1, pp. 53-68.
- Karayan, S. and Gathercoal, P. (2005), "Assessing service-learning in teacher education", *Teacher Education Quarterly*, Vol. 32 No. 3, pp. 79-92.
- Keeton, Morris T & Tate, Pamela J (1978). *Learning by experience--what, why, how*. Jossey-Bass, San Francisco
- Kolb, A. and Kolb, D.A. (2003), *Experiential Learning Theory Bibliography*, Experience Based Learning Systems, Inc., Cleveland, OH, available at: www.learningfromexperience.com.
- Kolb, D.A. (1984), *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and development*, Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs, NJ.
- Lewin, Kurt. (1952) *Field Theory in the Social Sciences: Selected Theoretical Papers*. London: Tavistock.
- Lowenthal, D. and Sosland, J. (2007), *Making the grade: how a semester in Washington may influence future academic performance?*, *The Journal of Political Science Education*, Vol. 3 No. 2 (in press).
- Michael S. Retallick, Charles Steiner. (2009) *A Model for Implementing a College-wide Experiential Learning Program in Higher Education*, *NACTA Journal*, March.
- Mireille Pouget & Michael Osborne. (2004) *Accreditation or validation of prior experiential learning: knowledge and savoirs in France - a different perspective?* *Studies in Continuing Education*, Vol. 26, No. 1, March.
- Piaget, Jean. (1967) *The Mental Development of the Child*, in *Six Psychological Studies*, ed. David Elkind. New York: Vintage Books.
- Salim Ismail, Michael S. Malone & Yuri Van Geest. (2014) *Exponential organisations*, Diversion Books, pp. 51-84.

Silverman, S.L. and M.E. Casazza. (2000). Learning and development. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Wingfield, S.S. and Black, G. (2005), Active versus passive course designs: the impact on student outcomes, Journal of Education for Business, Vol. 81 No. 2, pp. 119-23.

Commission Memorandum of 30 October 2000 on lifelong learning SEC(2000) 1832 final.

OECD, Learning Compass 2030, in brief accessed on <https://www.oecd.org/education/2030-project/teaching-and-learning/learning/learning-compass-2030/>

OECD, Skills for jobs, Romania country note (2018), accessed on https://www.oecdskillsforjobsdatabase.org/data/country_notes/Romania%20country%20note.pdf

Appendix 1

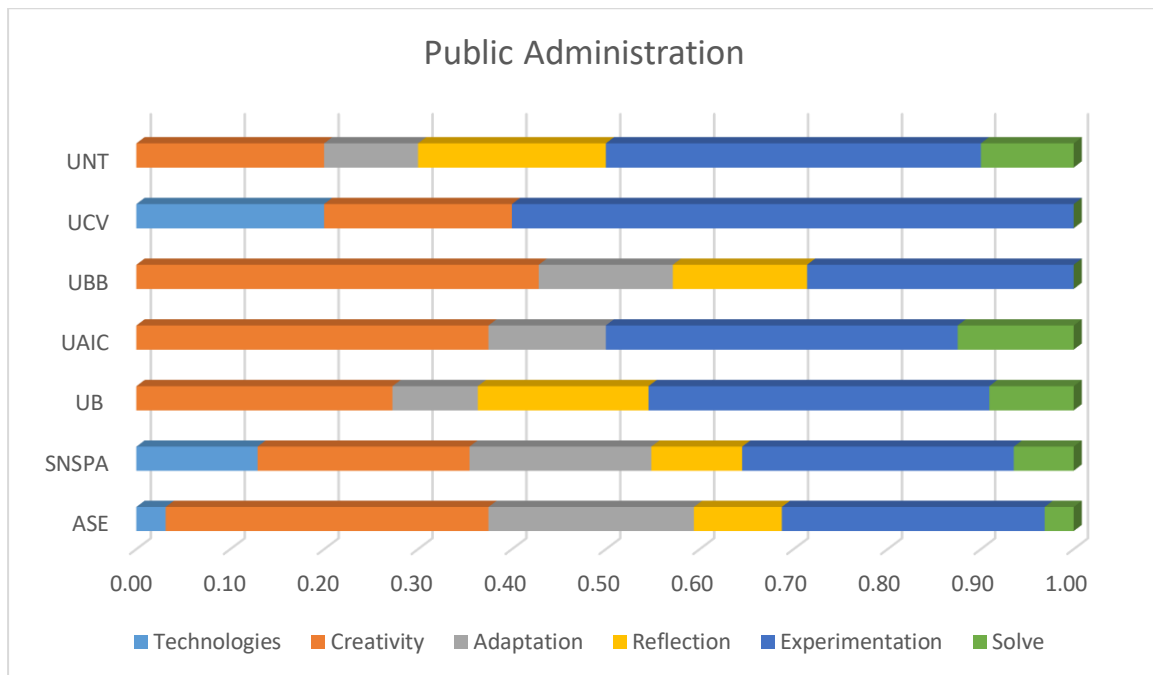
The list of studied Universities and Faculties

No.	University	Acronym	Faculty/Field of study
1.	The Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Bucharest	ASE	Faculty of Administration and Public Management, Public administration / Bachelor in public administration
2.			Faculty of Management, Management / Bachelor in Economics
3.	National University of Political Studies and Public Administration, Bucharest	SNSPA	Faculty of Public Administration, Public administration / B.A. in Administrative Sciences
4.			Faculty of Management / BA in Economics
5.	"Alexandru Ioan Cuza" University of Iasi	UAIC	Faculty of Economics and Business Administration, Public administration / Bachelor of Administrative Sciences
6.			Faculty of Economics and Business Administration, Management / Bachelor of Economics
7.	Babeş-Bolyai University of Cluj-Napoca	UBB	Faculty of Political, Administrative And Communication Sciences, Faculty of Political, Administrative and Communication Sciences Public Administration / Bachelor in Administration Sciences
8.			Faculty of Economics and Business Administration, Management / Bachelor in Economics (in Romanian or English)
9.	University of Craiova	UCV	Faculty of Law and Social Sciences, Public Administration/Graduate in administrative sciences
10.			Faculty of Economics and Business administration, Management / Bachelor in Economic Science
11.	University of Bucharest	UB	Faculty of Business and Administration, Public Administration / Bachelor of Administrative Sciences
12.	"Lucian Blaga" University of Sibiu	LBU	Faculty of Economic Sciences, Management / Bachelor of Economic Sciences
13.	Nicolae Titulescu" University of Bucharest	UNT	The Faculty of Social and Administrative Sciences, Public Administration / Bachelor of Administrative Sciences
14.	Hyperion University from Bucharest	UH	Faculty of Economic Sciences, Management / Degree in Economics Sciences

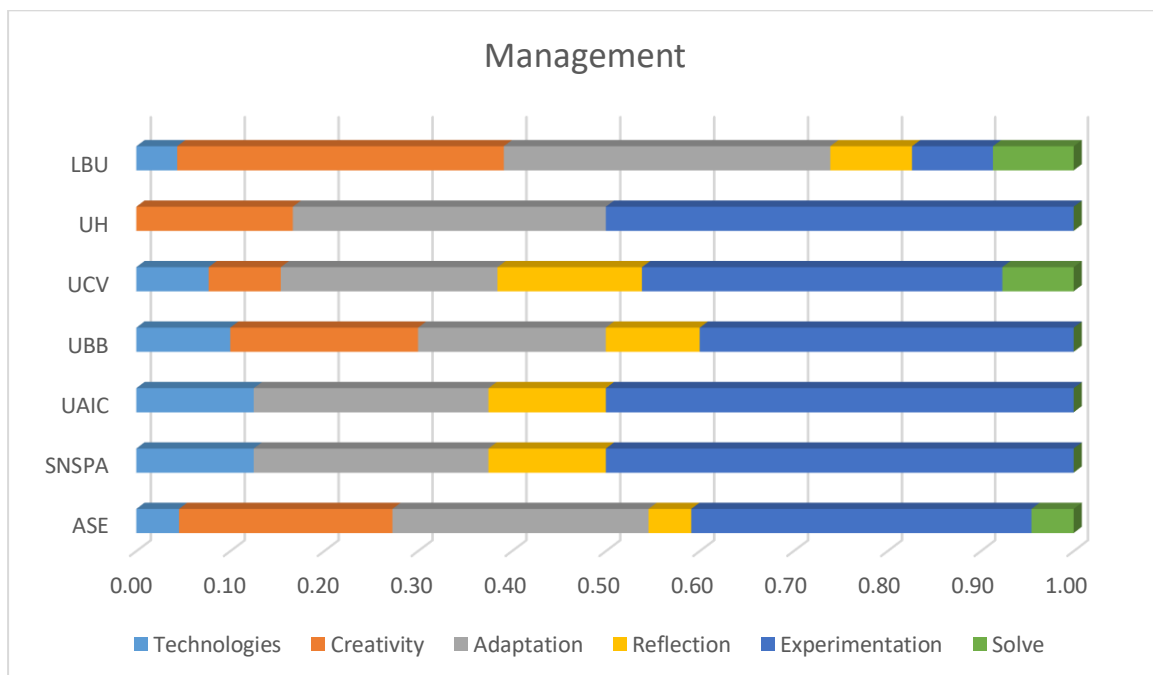
Appendix 2

Graphics resulted from the research

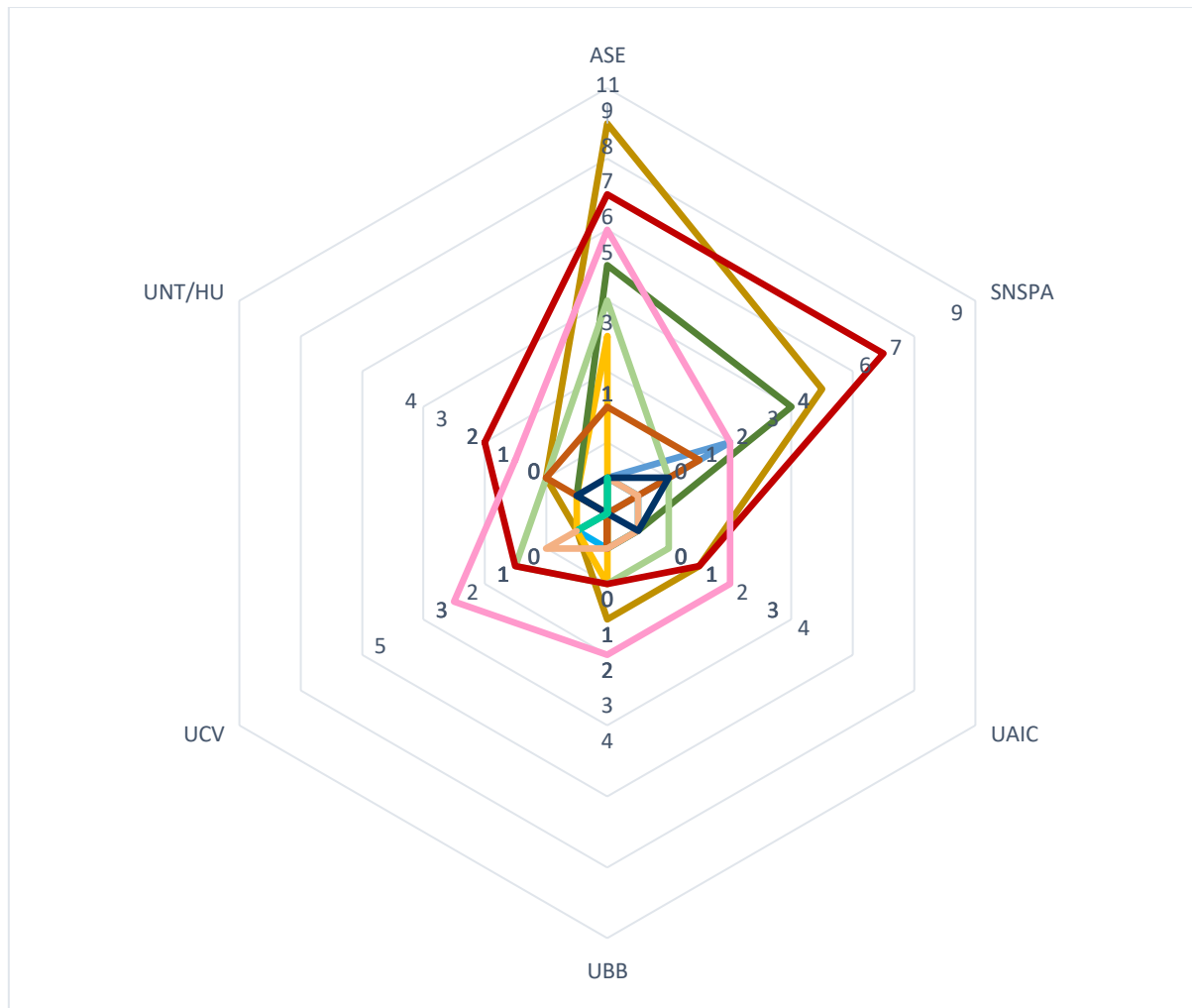
Graphic 1: Comparative study of the score gained by each Faculty of Public Administration



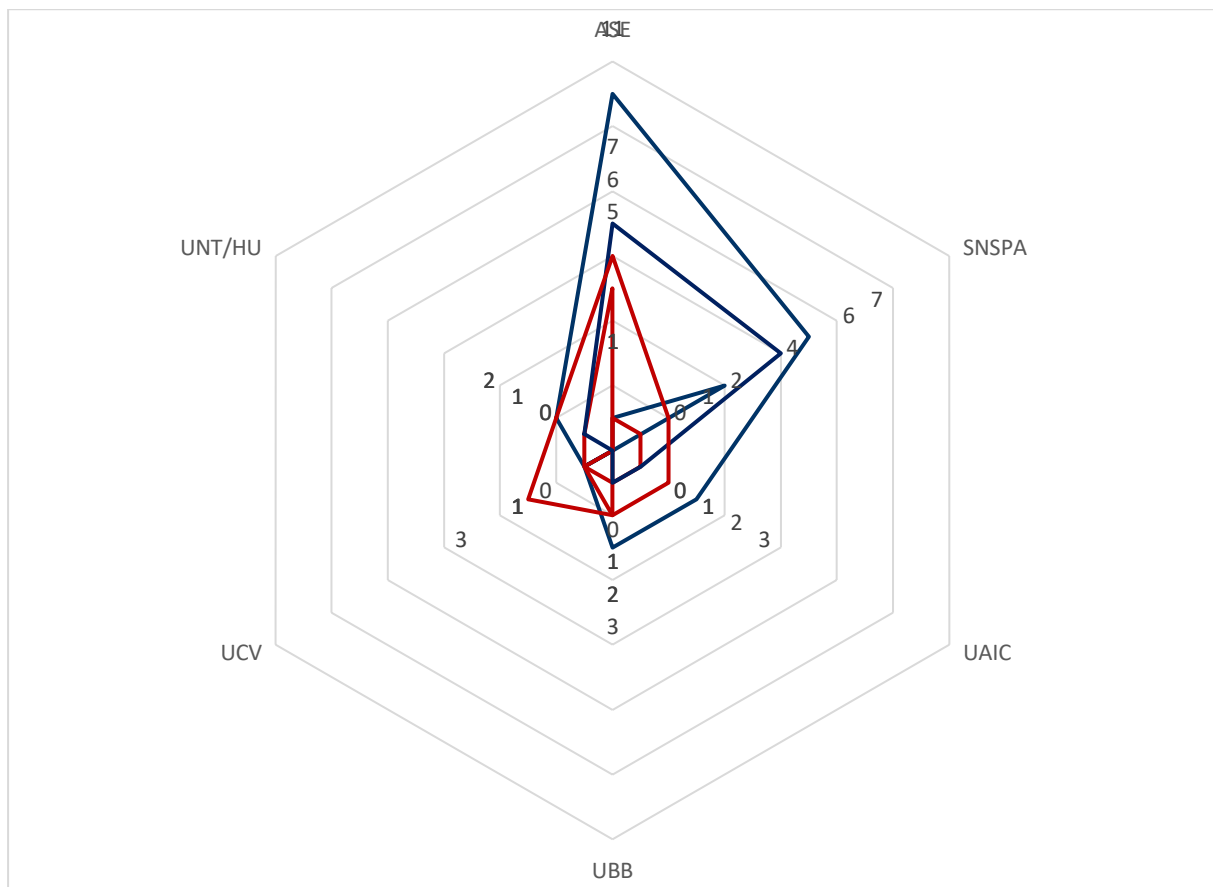
Graphic 2: Comparative study of the score gained by each Faculty in Management



Graphic 3: Comparative study of the score gained by each University in both field of studies



Graphic 4: Comparative study of the score gained by each University in both field of studies on the necessary skills for future employment market (new technologies, adaptation, creativity)



Graphic 5: Comparative study of each University in both field of studies on the new technologies

