

The Importance of Curricular Flexibility in These Liquid Times

Carlos-Sánchez María Dolores, Rivas-Gutiérrez Jesús, Esquivel-Lozano Alejandra Estefania, Ruíz-Silva Gloria Miguel, Martínez-Ortiz Rosa María, Tavizón García Jesús Andrés and Carlos-Félix Manuel Alejandro

Autonomous University of Zacatecas, Mexico

***Corresponding author:** Jesús Rivas Gutiérrez, Autonomous University of Zacatecas, Mexico

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ABSTRACT

The era of liquid modernity currently unfolding worldwide constantly alters the status quo of our lived reality. Contexts and situations whether political, economic, geographic, psychological, professional, or even educational that once seemed immutable and independent now require continuous scrutiny and effort. They must respond to criticisms, grievances, and demands to remain relevant and avoid falling behind or becoming obsolete. Consequently, higher education institutions responsible for developing the executive and operational human capital needed to navigate these scenarios must adjust and even restructure their curricula to stand out among their peers. Such efforts lead to greater political, social, and economic benefits and recognition. In this regard, curricular restructuring framed by the paradigm of flexibility across academic, administrative, and teaching-learning processes represents the most pertinent, viable, and feasible approach to addressing this situation. This paper offers a reflection from that perspective, serving as a means to help cultivate highly competitive professionals capable of addressing existing challenges and, in doing so, gradually transforming an overwhelming reality into one that is more relaxed and enjoyable.

Keywords: Liquid Modernity; Restructuring; Curricular Flexibility

Summary

The times or liquid modernity that we are experiencing worldwide affect and alter the status quo of the reality we live in at every moment. All the political, economic, geographical, psychological, labor and even educational contexts and situations that previously seemed immutable and independent, now have to be under the watchful eye and continuous work to respond to the points, claims and even demands made of them, in order to address them and not fall behind and be left behind. To this end, higher education institutions, which are responsible for generating the executive and operational human resources to face these scenarios, must be making adjustments and even restructurings in their curricula to stand out among their educational peers, thereby assuming and receiving better political, social, and economic benefits and recognition. For this purpose, one of the main educational guidelines or policies that has been proposed for

some time now, namely the contextualized curricular restructuring under the paradigm of school, academic, administrative, and teaching and learning process flexibility, currently represents the most pertinent, viable, and feasible alternative to address this situation. For this reason, a reflective work is presented from this perspective, and as a contributing element to train professional human resources that are highly competitive to work on solving the many existing problems and thereby gradually change the overwhelming reality into a more relaxing and enjoyable one.

Introduction

Day by day, education is subjected to new educational policies that generate pressure to make the necessary adjustments to respond to the evolving demands of the social and labor sectors. In this context, the institutional curriculum, in general, faces the greatest challenges. In a broader context, the signing of international agreements,

as well as increasingly aggressive and rampant globalization processes, especially those related to the economy, have led to a paradigm shift towards new, flexible educational models connected through inter-institutional networks. The issue of flexibility in education, and particularly curricular flexibility, is fundamental in response to the arrival of the so-called knowledge society, in which fundamental categories such as education for life, lifelong learning, continuing education, etc., emerge; educational flexibility currently constitutes, worldwide, one of the intentions and axes along which economic and educational policies, the labor field, academic and professional training, and the curriculum and study plans in this new century are moving. The issue of curriculum, by its very nature and projective and promotional character, always has a prospective dimension and, by its own dynamics and perspective, tends to anticipate the reality of the present and direct itself towards new changes, moments or contextual situations; that is, it serves for a changing and modifying present, but thinking about the near future, and although this term has become a common concept in school and academic jargon, its meaning is neither unique nor static [1].

Although it's a familiar word within the educational vocabulary, its meaning isn't specific. It's a Latin word meaning "path" or "way," and it's commonly used and understood by students to designate the set of subjects, courses, and school or academic activities that they must complete to reach a certain educational level and obtain a degree or diploma. For teachers, its meaning and interpretation create the academic framework within which their professional practice and work take place, becoming a source of self-projection, reflection, and evaluation of the profession itself. From the perspective of educational administration, the curriculum comprises a set of requirements that educational institutions must consider, undertake, and implement to achieve legally established and registered academic studies. With these three descriptions—those of the student, the teacher, and the educational administration, among others—it becomes clear that it's a polysemous and complex concept encompassing everything from educational philosophy to policy, including the most basic and practical aspects of education, training, teaching, learning, and more, even the broadest, holistic and eclectic ones [2]. Because this concept finds its foundation in different sources and fields of the educational sciences as a whole, one of the first and most basic foundations is that which comes from philosophy and refers to the determination of the aims pursued by the curriculum, contextualizing it in the historical-social moment being experienced.

This foundation gives it the character of the humanistic approach that generally permeates the educational process, coexisting along the way with the philosophical aspects that have been followed previously. A second foundation lies in the social context where the curriculum will be developed, because it is in itself a social and historical

product. The entire social dimension of the school, the student, and the teacher is projected onto the curriculum, determining the model of professionals and society that it intends to promote, and whose realization is implicit or explicit in the objectives/purposes and curricular content. It is also important to always keep in mind, as already pointed out, that the curriculum takes place in a specific culture, place and time, performing a mediating function between the student, the teacher, the social context, the culture and the world of work, but it is also expressed in the form of political intervention when it acts at different levels in the name of the general or particular interests of something, a group or someone, generating in this and therefore contrary situations, for example, the greater the intervention of an administrative State policy, the less intervention of social interests, giving rise to the reproduction of social inequalities within the school, among other things. Furthermore, the curriculum also serves as an academic framework for the subliminal recognition and guidance of society because it is part of state intervention, and through education, the state intervenes in social organization.

Organizing the distribution of knowledge through education is not only a way to influence culture but also the entire social and economic structure of society. Since the curriculum is based on the academic and scientific knowledge that comprises its various areas and subjects, it must also have a solid and coherent epistemological foundation. This perspective must be thoroughly considered when planning and implementing the curriculum through the specific activities of intentionality, organization, and sequencing of content and objectives, thereby establishing coordination between subjects and their interdisciplinary approaches. On the other hand, it requires psychological knowledge of the individuals involved in the teaching-learning process and knowledge of the psychological nature of learning processes. Therefore, it must explicitly and implicitly contain a proposal directly linked to a theory of teaching and learning. To this end, a clear understanding of the psychological characteristics of the students entering the educational institution is necessary, based on the admission profiles, considering their learning style, aptitudes, interests, etc., in order to adapt this curricular justification to the institutional document. This section should not overlook the psychological dimension of the teacher, including their corresponding aptitudes, attitudes, and values, which, among other consequences, will influence the practical application of the curriculum [3].

The boundaries between these justifications and possibly others (the increase in the number of justifications will depend on how many theoretical fields intersect during the development of the curriculum) cannot be rigid and can always be debated from the indicated fields, thus confirming the complex structuring, interrelation and internal epistemic interpretation of the curriculum.

Curriculum Flexibility as a Response to Liquid Modernity

International agreements and the processes of economic globalization have led to a paradigm shift, moving educational models towards flexible network models. In an era where the development of information technology leads to the intensive use of highly segmented information and knowledge, with continuous growth and redefinition, flexibility has become a key characteristic of labor and educational policies in these fluid socio-historical times. With the flexibilization of work, the demand for flexibility in disciplinary training, and the flexibility of curricula, the new production of knowledge must implicitly entail a new paradigm that generates and constitutes a radical change in the structures of higher education institutions to meet the new demands of knowledge production, distribution, and application. Such approaches move towards a harmonious intersection between education, economy, society, and employment; the discourse affirms that curricular flexibility is part of the proposals for professional training for employment in the new global economy, understanding flexibility as an educational project or policy with primary attention to the curriculum (malleable study plans), interpreted as a curricular structure of technical organization and divergent conceptual construction, which aims to enable the action of a series of strategies that gradually and in accordance with the discipline, the profession, the regulations, and the institutional resources lead to student-centered learning.

Some of the Key Aspects of a Flexible Curriculum that should be Considered when Redesigning it are the Following:

- A. Definition and implementation of academic credits that allow for measuring student effort, class hours, and workload in a subject or course.
- B. Organization of course types and academic activities with credit values established based on the total time students dedicate to a subject or course, combining class hours with independent study.
- C. Management, regulatory, and support mechanisms intended to assist and support students throughout their academic journey in building their academic path.
- D. A technical structure of the curricula, logically and sequentially organized with respect to the elements and content of the curriculum, potentially including a table of equivalencies and credit transfers.
- E. Student mobility is defined as the temporary transfer of a student to another higher education institution, whether national or international, with which an agreement exists, to take courses, complete internships, or participate in research projects without

losing their rights at their home school. The purpose is to enrich their comprehensive education through academic and cultural experiences outside their usual environment, thereby strengthening their academic development, fostering intercultural understanding, developing global competencies, and creating professional and personal networks with students and professors from other places.

F. A system of tutoring, advising, and mentoring is designed to offer personalized support to students to promote their comprehensive development, improve their academic performance, and prevent academic delays or dropout.

G. A clear and objective relationship between curricular concepts and objectives is established, understanding that concepts are the theoretical content or knowledge to be taught, while objectives are the specific learning goals that the student will achieve.

H. Interdisciplinarity, curricular, academic, and school organization; applied interdisciplinarity as the integration of two or more disciplines that cross their concepts and methods to study a problem jointly and comprehensively; organization based on breaking down rigid boundaries between subjects or courses to seek global knowledge.

I. Study plans with an international perspective and outlook that integrate global trends, analysis of future scenarios, and academic mobility to prepare professionals capable of anticipating complex challenges. Together, these expressions and more are essential elements in the construction, interpretation, and application of study plans within a flexible curriculum [4].

Timing and Orientation Towards Change with Flexibility

Since the late 1980s, higher education has undergone transformations that have reoriented its social function. For professional training, this has represented a continuous need for self-evaluations, which in these new, fluid times has led to an urgent need to move from an educational institution ossified in its academic processes, disconnected from the needs of the productive and social sectors, weakened in its social relevance, with excessive tuition costs, inertia among its actors, outdated academic content, obsolete infrastructure, etc. This situation has resulted in a significant decline in the quality of education offered. In this regard, the definition of educational quality is, for some, a vague and ambiguous concept; for others, it clearly represents an inclusiveness that considers the integration of the academic world into the social and economic dynamics, local, regional, national, and international, as the central axis of the curricular transformations currently necessary to respond to current challenges, signifying an adaptation for global social and labor integration.

The Basic Principles that Permeate Educational Policies Aimed at Curriculum Flexibility are:

- A. The integration of the educational process with economic development, as well as its restructuring according to the country's needs;
- B. The recognition of education as the lever for the country's transformation, enabling it to enter a changing world dominated by the globalization of markets;
- C. The requirement to emphasize the effectiveness and improve the quality of the educational and administrative process, considering that these actions will positively impact the quality, coverage, and administration of the service;
- D. The shift in teaching and learning methods to focus on learning to be, learning to learn, and learning to do, emphasizing the need for teacher professionalization through the updating of their knowledge and continuous improvement of their pedagogical and didactic skills.

The intention is that this set of points and guidelines for higher education in the 21st century will lead to curricular and educational transformations. Changing the curriculum based on scientific and disciplinary advances, technological and information development, the globalized economy, new labor relations, and forms of educational marketing will also bring about changes in teaching practices and activities. Among these activities, the adoption of mechanisms to promote new schemes of student socialization and resocialization stands out, as this is considered an essential requirement for training professionals who can face new challenges of all kinds. Other key elements include the systematic review of curricula and the opening of new continuing education options to provide graduates with better opportunities to update their knowledge in their discipline, specialize, or acquire new knowledge to complement their training. Currently, most higher education curricula, as a result of their self-evaluation processes, exhibit the following characteristics:

- Strong disciplinary tradition, resulting in little contact between disciplines and few specializations within a discipline; an essentially theoretical workload with a high concentration of content on conceptual and historical aspects and little attention to practical and intervention content;
- A rigid and vertical structure that does not allow for mobility, with linearly structured groups that follow the same training path from beginning to end, without the possibility of diversifying their interests;
- Repetitive, outdated, and disjointed content, with a curriculum made up of a number of subjects or courses with different names but similar or equivalent content, and a delay in incorporating scientific and humanistic advances; an imbalance between

general, basic, and specialized content;

- A long duration of professional studies due to a degree program with an extensive content load;

a mandatory course load with little or no choice by the student;

- And no use of academic credits despite their presence in the curriculum. Due to the lack of collateral inputs and outputs, the training process is a closed circuit;
- There is no possibility of return or of rectifying the career [5].

Almost all of the curricular problems identified are associated with the concept of rigidity as a way of referring to the curricular structure that limits academic and administrative dynamics. This is no small matter; it is important because those involved in the educational and administrative process are unaware of it, falling into the trap of simplifying partial changes without considering the implications in other areas. In other words, the guiding principle of the new model resulting from a curricular restructuring aimed at quality should be flexibility as a structural innovation of the cutting-edge academic program and its continuous, ongoing academic and administrative evaluation.

Curriculum Flexibility and Professional Skills

A flexible curriculum is a way of organizing higher education studies that allows for maximum adaptation to students' aptitudes and interests through a selection of specializations within a general framework. It is not a chaotic system, but rather an intelligently ordered improvement to achieve a specific and well-defined educational purpose. Therefore, it is important that when applying a flexible curriculum, all teachers, students, and administrators have a clear and conscious understanding of its nature, its justification, and the means and procedures by which it can be successfully implemented. Therefore, it is important that curricular flexibility and the determination of professional competencies be addressed without procedural rigidity in the curriculum and its contexts. In this regard, a flexible model, coupled with professional competencies, the intention to increase graduation rates, reduce dropout and academic delays, diversify educational offerings, debureaucratize education, strengthen practical learning, provide education for life, and promote decentralization and horizontal decision-making, represents a viable and feasible alternative. To improve quality, continuous assessments must be implemented, and their results should inform innovations aimed at flexibility and the development of professional competencies. This fosters innovative educational practices designed to cultivate in students the dispositions and abilities necessary for professional performance.

Following this trend, curricular flexibility was defined and advanced because, firstly, a flexible curriculum is a way of organizing higher education; Secondly, it allows for maximum adaptation to

students' circumstances; thirdly, it combines the general with the specific; fourthly, it introduces orderly improvement; and fifthly, it is realistic. Within this context, the selection of content and academic pathways would be the most widespread expression of the changes made with a view to forging a comprehensive education for students, encompassing the development of all their faculties, emotions, intellect, feelings, reasoning, aptitudes, and attitudes. Comprehensive learning is also fostered from a holistic, meaningful, autonomous, creative, self-critical, practical, and participatory perspective. Furthermore, flexibility allows for improvements in pedagogy, organization, management, administration, and school processes. The individualized design of the training process under curricular flexibility allows for greater openness in structure and modality, generating a more competitive professional profile, a more appropriate sequence and timeline for completing the necessary credits, and greater opportunities for internal and external mobility. All of this is supported by personalized assistance through advising, tutoring, and mentoring. In short, curricular flexibility impacts student work, faculty performance, and, more generally, the work of higher education institutions.

For students, it allows for an improved quality of education by fostering an individualized and comprehensive professional profile, based on and grounded in competencies for success in the workplace. It also impacts academic performance through supervised and assisted work via tutoring, advising, and mentoring. For faculty, it enhances their educational performance through continuous professional development. For educational institutions, it allows for diversification and updating of their educational offerings and, above all, improves social relevance and integration into society. Regarding professional competencies, there are a number of arguments that demonstrate the need to respond to students' expectations regarding their entry into the labor market; the curriculum based on comprehensive professional competencies, which articulate global knowledge, professional knowledge, and work experiences, must recognize real needs and problems and be defined through a diagnosis of experiences in social reality, the practice of professions, the development of the discipline, and the labor market. This combination of elements allows for the identification of the needs toward which professional training will be oriented, from which the comprehensive or generic professional competencies, essential for establishing the graduate profile, also emerge [6]. The professional competency model should establish three levels: basic, generic, and specific competencies, ranging from broad to specific.

Basic competencies are the intellectual capacities essential for learning a profession; these include cognitive, technical, and methodological competencies, many of which are acquired in previous educational levels. Generic competencies form the common foundation of the profession, referring to the specific situations in professional practice that require complex responses. Finally, specific competen-

cies are the particular basis of professional practice and are linked to specific conditions of execution. The flexible competency-based curriculum is built by guiding the development of innovative practices that demonstrate didactic approaches geared toward learning and the specific competencies identified at their designated point during the course of disciplinary and professional training.

Conclusion

In general terms, higher education is permeated by three situations or axes inherent to globalization: the generation and application of knowledge, the development and innovation of information and communication technologies, and the improvement of learning capacity. These situations, in one way or another, affect higher education institutions and urgently demand greater flexibility in their structure, both academic and administrative. This is because the development of knowledge has generated a vast amount of information in all disciplines and in every imaginable format, from print to electronic and digital. Furthermore, technological and telecommunications developments have incorporated new ways of carrying out educational, professional, and work activities, giving rise to new learning capacities and new professions, some of them hybrid, which give knowledge a threefold presence: as the foundation of professions and as a product and application of science. All of this and much more has compelled higher education institutions to rethink their curricular design and the administrative activities of their educational systems to meet the challenge and task of training professional, competitive, and productive human resources possessing universal values and a strong sense of social and ethical responsibility.

Until now, higher education had faced a rigid, monolithic, and outdated school, academic, administrative, and governance structure because it attempted to mold students with homogeneous characteristics once and for all; that is, it provided terminal professional training, the purpose of which was to equip students with the basic knowledge, skills, and aptitudes to perform a specific profession. Upon completion of their studies, after presenting their final project, students received a degree that allowed them to practice that profession for their entire lives. However, emerging educational trends, driven more by the effects of globalization and competitiveness than by internal disciplinary needs, require—and often as a necessity—not only a job and a profession for life, but rather an education that develops versatile human resources supported by interdisciplinarity. Interdisciplinarity has gradually begun to gain ground in various professions and has also started to play a crucial role in graduates, enabling them to perform diverse activities and understand the reasons behind them. Thus, the student's training profile must shift from knowledge acquisition to metacognition of that knowledge. In this way, higher education must strive to be more equitable, continuous, and democratic so that a greater number of people can access the same quality education, which is socially relevant and disciplinarily pertinent.

To achieve the above, a flexible curriculum is urgently needed, justified by the following principles: the productive potential of different population groups; the need for training and retraining in accordance with technological market contingencies and the reformulation of professions and occupations; technological development that has modified both professional and occupational activities; establishing an appropriate and timely relationship with the rapid expansion and democratization of learning methods and contexts; operating with a more modern and open vision through greater vertical articulation of stages and sequences for continuous training and greater horizontal flexibility that favors educational mobility; adopting a common and flexible framework of credits, degrees, and qualifications that impacts the system of transfers, validations, and the evaluation of studies and, consequently, the educational and labor mobility of those who access the higher education system.

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Jesús Rivas Gutiérrez . Biomed J Sci & Tech Res



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