

Curriculum Development in European Studies at the American University of Bulgaria: Challenges and Prospects

Jean F. Crombois

Abstract: *This paper presents the main features of the European studies program as developed at the American University in Bulgaria. It highlights the different challenges of designing such a program due to the specific nature of the institution. It concludes that the European studies program has gained increasing legitimacy amongst students but will most certainly have to adjust to the changing European Union itself without overlooking the need for an increasing cooperation with other higher education institutions in Bulgaria and in the wider region.*

Keywords: *European Union; American University in Bulgaria; Liberal Arts; Europeanization.*

As in other Bulgarian universities and higher education institutions, the program in European Studies has been of relatively recent creation. Nevertheless, after seven years of existence, it is possible to draw some first lessons of its main achievements.

This paper will address the main features of the European Studies program developed at the American University in Bulgaria (AUBG). It will start by locating the program within the discussions that have taken place in the European Union on the need to develop a uniform curriculum in the field of European studies. It will then proceed by presenting the main aspects of the program. Finally, it will provide some figures that may reflect the achievements made by the program since its inception.

1. Debates and Discussions on Curriculum Development in European Studies

Curriculum development in European Studies has triggered many discussions in Europe and it is fair to say that the debate is far from closed. In the early years of 2000, the European Commission even sponsored an initiative known under the acronyms of EPSNET and aimed at developing a common curriculum in European studies. Such common curriculum was justified on two reasons. The first derived from the ever increasing importance of the European Union in the EU citizens' daily life. The second was the growing demand by students across the EU of specific programs in this area. If the European Commission sponsored initiative has not yet led to any concrete proposal, it has had, at least, the merit to open the discussions on the subject.ⁱ

As observers have noticed, the evolution of programs of European studies in Europe has followed two different trends. On the one hand, programs have tended to narrow their perspectives on the European Union itself. On the other hand, the broader approach based on the European area has been increasingly neglected. This has led to a growing neglect of the different political, historical and cultural developments on the European continent to the profit of the study of the European Union as set of institutions and rules. This trend is being reflected in the approach on the recent EU enlargement (s) to Central and Eastern Europe. These enlargements offered a unique opportunity to investigate the nature of Europe from a multidisciplinary perspective, allying history, economics, sociology, international relations. Instead, most of the local and international scholarship has preferred to approach these enlargements from bureaucratic process managed from a technocratic manner reflected in conditionalities and benchmarks.ⁱⁱ

In South-Eastern Europe, the Bonn-based Center of European Studies has presided over the launch, in 2000, of a network of European Studies in South East Europe that

discussed, amongst other things, the development of a common curriculum in European studies for the region. Building on the experience in West European universities, this network advocated the need to:

“tailor specifically tailored programs taking into account the turbulent past of the region, the lack of democratic traditions and a civil society, the poor state of academic affairs and the emerging clear perspective of integration into the Euro-Atlantic institutions for South Eastern Europe”ⁱⁱⁱ

If the designers of the European Studies program at AUBG were aware of those discussions at the time of its creation in 2002, they also had to deal with the very specific nature of their institution. Indeed, as an American higher education institution located in Bulgaria, it had to face a number of challenges.

2. Teaching European Studies at the American University in Bulgaria: Main Challenges

The development of a curriculum in European studies at the American University in Bulgaria had to face three main challenges directly linked with the specific features of the institution. As an American university, it had to reconcile the US higher education system with the requirements of European studies. As an American University located in Bulgaria, it had to introduce a new subject in the country. Finally, as an American University within the European Union –since Bulgaria’s accession to the European Union- it had to adapt to the EU programs and policies concerning higher education.

The American University in Bulgaria has been created on the model of an undergraduate liberal arts college. It is fully accredited in the US by the New England Association of Schools and College, Inc. through its Commission on Institutions of Higher Education.

In 2002, the American University has developed both a major and a minor in European Studies which is now taught as part of the Department of Politics and European Studies. As a liberal arts institution, the University also puts a strong emphasis learning across disciplines that took the form of the creation of general education credits to be taken in four fields of enquiry such as Aesthetic expression, Historical analysis, Literary Analysis, Moral and Philosophical Reasoning.

As an higher education institution located in Bulgaria, AUBG is chartered as an institution of higher education by an Act of the Grand National Assembly of the Republic of Bulgaria and is authorized to grant Bulgarian diplomas with the same rights and responsibilities as other Bulgarian universities. Recently, AUBG has recently completed successfully its accreditation by the Bulgarian National Evaluation and Accreditation Agency of the Council of Ministers.

Finally, as an higher education located in the European Union since Bulgaria’s accession to the EU in January 2007, AUBG is fully part of the EU higher education area. In this respect, AUBG is the holder a standard Erasmus Charter and has concluded bilateral agreements with more than 48 universities across the European Union. AUBG has also been an active participant in the different Jean Monnet programs in developing a number of modules in European Studies.

3. Structure of the Major Program in European Studies

The European Studies program provides an inter-disciplinary focus on the problems, progress, and prospects of the European integration process. Besides combining the political, economic, historical and legal dimensions of contemporary European society, the major requires proficiency in an additional European language.^{iv}

The European Studies major focuses on the following areas: EU policies and policy making process, EU institutions, EU law, EU enlargement, and comparative politics of Europe and South East Europe.

The European Studies curriculum is designed to enable all graduates to meet the following skill-or competency-based student outcomes:

- have a multidisciplinary view of European integration and a comprehensive understanding of European politics in general
- master comprehensive knowledge about EU institutions, EU policies, EU law and EU policy-making policy
- develop sensitivity and knowledge of European culture and society
- develop ability to analytically absorb and assess current events and daily media reports in Europe today
- consolidate theoretical knowledge and research skills necessary for graduate and post-graduate studies
- develop foreign language skills and familiarity with the EU specialized vocabulary
- develop critical thinking
- develop verbal and written communication skills.

In order to graduate with the Bachelor of Arts, students are required to take a minimum of 120 credit hours, including their general education requirements. The Major in European Studies consisted of 12 courses, plus language proficiency. The 12 courses are regrouped into two main categories. The first consisted of a number of 9 required courses:

ECO 101: Principles of Macroeconomics
POS 101: Introduction to Politics
POS 102: Introduction to International Relations
EUR111: Europe in the Twentieth Century
EUR 212: Introduction to European Integration
EUR 213: Comparative Politics of Europe
EUR 311: European Law

The second category consists of 2 sets of elective courses of which students are expected to choose three courses with at least:

One to be chosen among the following:

EUR331: Topics in European Politics and Society
EUR 332: Topics in Eastern European Politics
EUR 357: EU Institutional Framework

One to be chosen among the following:

EUR 405: Topics related to the European Union

EUR 406: Topics in Economics related to the European Union
EUR 491: Senior Thesis: Theory and Methods in Political Science

Language Proficiency

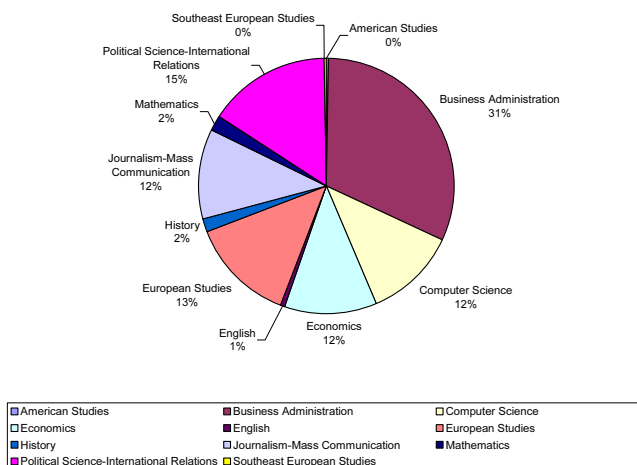
To fulfill their requirements for the Major in European Studies, students must show proficiency in one of the EU official language other than English. AUBG offers language courses in French, Spanish and in German. The requirements for the EUR major consist of four language courses (Introduction I & II and Intermediary I & II) as well the completion of a special EU terminology course in the language chosen to fulfill the major requirements.

In short, the program for the Major in European studies follows most of the Bonn guidelines in emphasizing the importance of courses dealing with regional issues and also, which is certainly one of its specificity, the importance of developing proficiency in one additional European language other than English and Bulgarian.

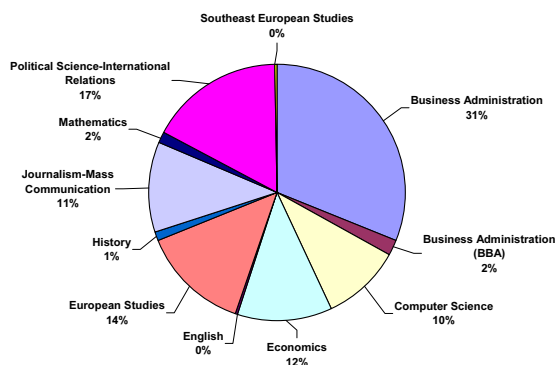
4. Evolution of the European Studies Program at AUBG: Some Statistics

Since its launch in 2002, the European Studies program proved to be the fastest growing program at AUBG. It started from ten students in spring 2002, to reach fifty in the following year, to eighty in 2004 and a peak of one hundred in 2007. Since its inception until 2008, the European Studies program has attracted in average more than 10% of all our declared majors at AUBG (see charts below)^v

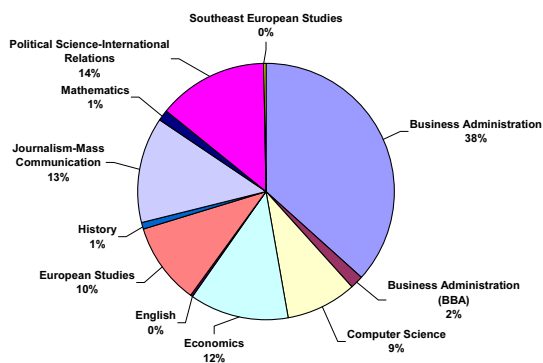
Spring 2005 Declared Majors as a % of Total Declared Majors (629)



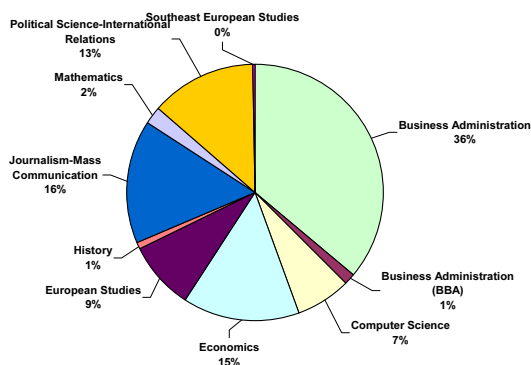
Spring 2006 Declared Majors as a Percent of Total Declared Majors (864)
Declared by 577 Students



Spring 2007 Declared Majors as a Percent of Total Declared Majors (966)
Declared by 659 Students



Spring 2008 Declared Majors as a Percent of Total Declared Majors (941)
Declared by 633 Students



There seem to be two reasons that may account for the success of Major in European Studies at AUBG.

The first one is the flexibility of the American higher education system that enables students to graduate in another major in different field of study. In this respect, the European studies program presents the features of being the one mostly combined with another major. Students declaring their first Major in European studies combine it with a second Major in, by order of importance, in Political Science and International Relations, in Business and then in Economics. More interestingly is the number of students who choose European studies as their second Major. By order of importance, students declaring their Major in Business, in Economics, in Journalism and Communications and in Political Science have taken advantage of this possibility.

These trends show the extent to which the Major in European studies has been able to gain its legitimacy at AUBG. More importantly, it also demonstrates the extent to which students in other fields feel the compelling need to complement their education by a Major in European studies. In other words, the awareness amongst AUBG students of the growing importance that the European dimension is taking in both their education and their future careers.

The second reason for the success of the European Studies program lies in the prospects it offers to AUBG students after their graduation. In this respect, about 50 % of the EUR graduates decide to enter the job market. Their employability rate is being estimated at 66 %. The sectors in which EUR graduates find employment are varied, from the NGOs in their own countries to consultancy companies without mentioning the public sector, working for different national ministries (Foreign Affairs, Finance, European Affairs...) or agencies.

The second half of the EUR graduates decide to pursue their education at a post-graduate level both in the US and in Europe. By personal experience of the author, it seems that students are increasingly opting for post-graduate studies in Europe rather than in the US, even if further data could confirm or infirm this trend. Amongst European Universities at which EUR majors have been accepted for post-graduate studies, on can

mention the London School of Economics and Political Science, Maastricht University, Leiden University and the Catholic University of Leuven.

Conclusion

As the other existing programs in European Studies in Bulgaria, the program at AUBG is certainly at a cross-road. On the one hand, Bulgaria's accession to the European Union opens even more the field of European studies. On the other hand, the program has to retain its local and regional approach. The extent to which the growing Europeanization under way will affect this subtle balance is certainly an issue to keep in mind for future curriculum developments in the field.

On a more practical level, the European Studies program at AUBG has entered a new phase of consolidation. This will certainly lead to some new adjustments in terms of course offerings covering new area of research in European studies such as Justice and Home Affairs and other fields of EU policies such as health, education and the environment without mentioning new possibilities for comparative political approaches.

Finally, the future of the European studies program at AUBG will also depend on the continued effort of the institution and its faculty to keep engaging both the

European and the Bulgarian dimension in their teaching and research. This could take the form of increased cooperation with other institutions through collaborative projects in both fields.

Contacts:

Jean F. Crombois
PhD in Modern European History (1999),
Free University of Brussels, Belgium
Assistant Professor of European Studies
Department of Politics and European Studies
American University in Bulgaria
1 Georgi Izmirliiev Sq.
2700 Blagoevgrad
++ 359 73 888 432
jcrombois@aubg.bg

ⁱ I. Bache, *Europeanization and Higher Education: Towards a Core Curriculum in European Studies* Paper presented to the ESRC/UACES Study Group and Seminar Series on the Europeanisation of British Politics and Policy-Making, Sheffield, 23 April, 2004. Available at: <http://aei.pitt.edu/1728/>

ⁱⁱ W. Outhwaite *Europe Beyond East and West*, in *The Sage Handbook of European Studies*, edited by Chris Rumford, Sage: London, 2009, pp. 58-68

ⁱⁱⁱ R. Biermans and E. Mintchev (eds.), *A Core Curriculum for the European Studies in South-East Europe*, Center of European Studies: Bonn, 2002, p. 1 Available at http://www.zei.de/download/zei_soe/curriculum.pdf

^{iv} Idem, p. 1

^v For further details, see: American University in Bulgaria. Undergraduate Program, 2009-2010, also available at: <http://www.aubg.bg/template5.aspx?page=114496&menu=001004000>

^v The author wishes to thank Mrs Tanya Papazova from the Provost's Office and the Registrar's at the American University in Bulgaria for compiling these data.