

# *Vocal-Performance Curriculum Development and Praxis in Romanian Higher Education*

Mihaela Buhaiciuc, Transilvania University of Brasov, Romania

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## **Abstract**

The current paper is an analysis of vocal performance curriculum development within the core of bachelor's degrees in Romania as they transitioned to the Bologna Process to ensure credit transferability within EU higher education institutions, worldwide accepted quality performance standards and, ultimately, to provide marketable professional singers for the international stages. The study includes teaching practices assessed through research-based evidence and the *currere* method, as well. The article represents a self-assessment of acquired teaching knowledge and experience in the specialized field of vocal performance and, projects outcomes on how an international framework could constructively impact the local perspective.

Keywords: Vocal Performance, Curriculum, Higher Education, Comparative Education

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## **Introduction - Understanding the Voice Training in a Broad Spectrum**

Within the humanities area in higher education, the vocal performance degree is one of the performing music degrees that academia proposes with the aim of providing qualified professional singers for the stage. In its beginnings, the vocal performance training/degrees referred to classical singing only and implied an education that prepared the student as a court singer, church singer and/or opera singer. Until the 20<sup>th</sup> century, we could discuss the classical vocal performance training within the historical style periods: Baroque, Romantic, Modern, becoming more specific when included in different schools of singing: German, Italian, French, English, or other. The Italians established a 5-year program for training and cultivating a classical voice through building strength and flexibility. Most schools had precise requirements for timbre, vibrato and register development.

Starting with the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the praxis of applied voice outside of official training exposed the voice to new concepts of timbre, vibrato and registers. Voice training slowly included light opera singers, performers of musicals, and later commercial singers, including the contemporary Christian singers. The schools adapted to student needs by providing singers with diverse training in classical and/or musical and/or commercial applied voice. Nowadays, in the international higher education institutions (HEIs), we find vocal performance degrees in classical, musical and commercial voice. A graduate in vocal performance may be versatile in one or more vocal styles: opera and jazz, musical and commercial, opera and musical, or solely in one vocal genre.

Nowadays, the aspiring singer may decide to pursue education in vocal performance (VP) by choosing from two types of bachelor's degrees: a Bachelor of Music (BM) in vocal performance, which is a professional degree that prepares students for a singing career, and a Bachelor of Arts (BA) in vocal performance with a curriculum that combines a liberal arts education with a more intellectual approach to music. Both bachelors last 4 years and allow the continuance of graduate studies: Master of Music (MM) and Doctor of Musical Arts (DMA) or PhD in music, while the student maintains singing activities within and outside the curriculum. Although other vocal programs, such as musical theater and art song degrees, have similar requirements and course outlines, the classical vocal performance programs will be considered in this study.

The objectives of this article are: (a) to trace historically and analytically the vocal performance bachelor program in Romania, (b) to identify curriculum changes and how these changes impacted the students and faculty of higher education (HE), (c) to emphasize the importance of praxis as a result to curriculum variations, and (d) to undertake a comparative analysis with the vocal performance bachelor programs in the U.S.A.

### **A Historical Approach to Romania's First Vocal Performance Programs in HEIs: Conservatories and Music Departments**

The first Music Conservatory was established on October 6th, 1864 through Decree No. 1312.

*'Regulamentul pentru Conservatorul de Muzică și Declamațiune'* approved by Alexandru Ioan Cuza, an HEI having two locations: in Bucharest and in Iasi (Maier, 2014).

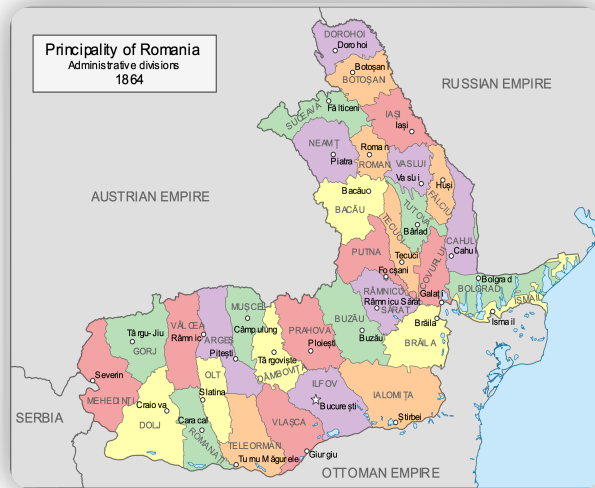


Figure 1: 1864 First VP Programs in Romania: Bucharest and Iasi Conservatories  
5-Year Length of Studies

Following the unification of Greater Romania on December 1st, 1918, the Cluj Napoca Music Conservatory, a former extension of Liszt Academy of Music from Budapest, became on September 17th, 1919, the third major music HEI (Maier, 2014) with a vocal performance program of five years.

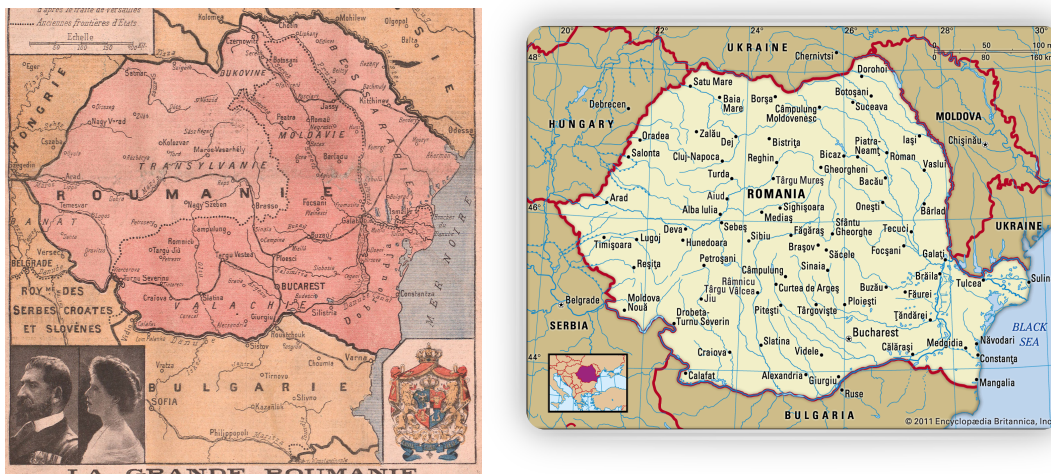


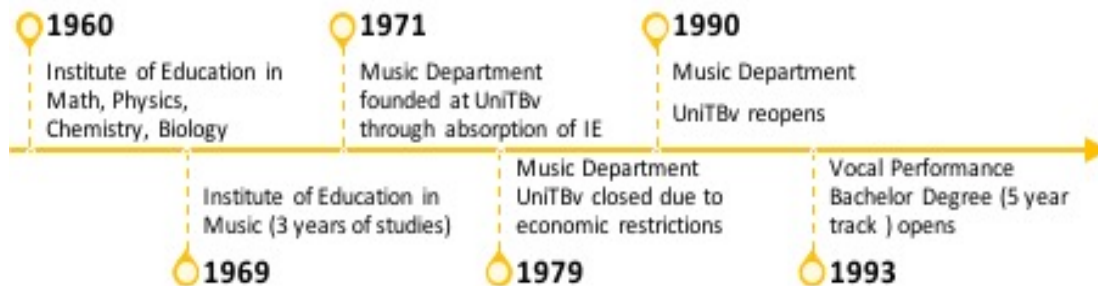
Figure 2: 1919 Three VP Programs in Romania: Bucharest, Iasi and Cluj Conservatories  
(Romania's map on the left column)  
1960 Three VP Programs in Addition to Several Institutes of Education  
(Romania's map on the right column)

In 1948, after the Paris Treaties, the Kingdom of Romania became the Republic of Romania, whose status and size maintained until today. In 1950, only two Conservatories were functioning (Maier, 2014), in Bucharest (under the name of Ciprian Porumbescu) and in Cluj-Napoca (under the name of Gheorghe Dima). Iasi Music Conservatory is closed until 1960 when it composer Achim Stoia's management and George Enescu's name.

In his in-depth research on the evolution of music HEIs in Romania under UEFISCDI funding (Executive Unit for funding HE, Research, Development, Innovation), Valentin Maier's historiographical report shows how, due to a lack of specialized music faculty in secondary education, Institutes of Education/Pedagogy founded starting in 1961 in different

cities and towns throughout Romania (Maier, 2014). These institutes later merged into the first local HEI, with or without a music department. So is the case for the Music Department at UniTBv, who transferred from the Institute of Music Education with a 3-year track in 1971 (Maier, 2014) to join the science education institutes under Transilvania University's name (UniTBv).

(a)



(b)

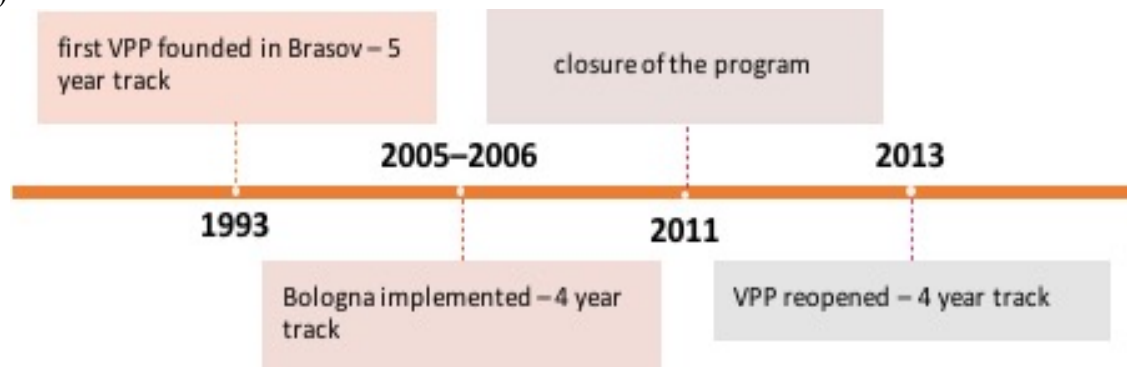


Figure 3: (a) The Making of UniTBv Through Fusion of Institutes of Education  
(b) Brasov Vocal Performance Degree Program With a Short History of 21 Years

Today, throughout Romania, local HEIs include a music department with a relatively young vocal performance degree program, while Cluj, Bucharest, and Iasi are socially maintaining the highbrow status they had for the past 160 years.

### VP Curriculum Development and the Bologna Process

The 2005 National Report (Damian, 2005) shows major changes in restructuring the HEIs and their curriculum starting with the 2005-6 academic year. Within its 160 years of existence, the Romanian VP program developed according to its times from a five-year track curriculum to a four-year degree program. In practice, today, the 5-year degree program is leveled with a 4-year BM/BA in vocal performance and a 2-year MM degree. While the Romanian bachelor is recognized within the international educational frame of HEIs, the MM is not. The students are required to take additional courses or to start a new MM at an international HEI outside Romania.

The three charts below show a VP course track comparison between different stages of Romanian HEIs: before and after the Romanian Revolution in 1989 (Table 1 and 2) and, before and after the implementation of Bologna Process (Table 2 and 3).

Table 1: 1961-1966 Vocal Performance Curriculum - Bucharest Music Conservatory<sup>1</sup>

<b>Foundational Courses</b>	<b>Music Courses</b>	<b>Vocal Performance Courses</b>	<b>Concert Performances/ (<i>Practica în Productie</i>)</b>	<b>Final State Exam</b>
<b>Scientific Socialism</b>	Music Theory	Applied Voice	Conservatory's Concert Studio	Voice recital
<b>Dialectical and Historical Materialism</b>	Harmony	Opera Workshop	Conservatory's Opera Workshop production	One Opera Role in an opera production
<b>Marxist-Leninist Aesthetics</b>	Theory of Forms	Rhythm and Dance	Conservatory's Chorus	Scientific Socialism
Psychology	Music History	Stage Combat	Other	
Pedagogy	Romanian Folklore	Stage Make-up		
Foreign Language: (optional: RUS, FR, DE, EN, ITL)	Piano	Vocal Pedagogy		
Physical Educational	Chorus			
<b>History of Arts</b>				

Note: Starting in 1973, all music performance graduates had to enroll in military service (Maier, 2014)

Table 2: 1996-2001 Vocal Performance Curriculum -Transylvania University of Brasov<sup>2</sup>

<b>Foundational Courses</b>	<b>Music Courses</b>	<b>Vocal Performance Courses</b>	<b>Concert Performances/ (<i>Practica Artistică</i>)</b>	<b>Final State Exam</b>
Music Theory	Piano	Applied Voice	Department's Concert Studio	Voice recital
Music History	Polyphony	Opera Workshop	Opera Workshop production	and/or
<b>Critical Thinking</b>	General and Vocal Pedagogy	Acting for Singers	Other performances	One Opera Role in an opera production
Music Aesthetics	Harmony	Stage Movement		Paper Presentation on a chosen VP topic
Theory of Forms	Romanian Folklore	Stage Make-up		
<b>Philosophy of Culture</b>				
Psychology				
<b>Foreign Language: ITL and DE</b>				
Physical Educational				

<sup>1</sup> The curriculum is used from a course description of Maier, V. (2014) in *Evoluția instituțiilor muzicale de învățământ superior din timpul regimului comunist, SERIES HISTORICA*, Romanian Academy Publishing House, p. 133 - table, course classification and translation from Romanian are done by the author.

<sup>2</sup> Author's curriculum completed as a student at UniTBv.

Table 3: 2020-2024 Vocal Performance Curriculum -Transilvania University of Brasov

<b>Foundational Courses</b>	<b>Music Courses</b>	<b>Vocal Performance Courses</b>	<b>Concert Performances</b>	<b>Final State Exam</b>
Music Theory	Piano	Applied Voice	Department's Concert Studio	Voice recitals:
Music History	Polyphony	Opera Workshop	Opera Workshop production	20 min chamber music recital
<b>Intro to Music Management</b>	General Pedagogy (optional)	Acting for Singers	Other performances	40 min solo recital
Music Aesthetics	Harmony	Stage Movement		Paper Presentation on a chosen VP topic
Theory of Forms	Romanian Folklore	Stage Make-up		
Psychology optional	<b>Academic Writing</b>	Vocal Pedagogy		
Foreign Language: EN		<b>IPA - German, French Lyric Diction</b>		
Physical Educational				

Today, to complete a BM in VP in Romania requires fulfillment of 240 (European Credit Transfer System) ECTS credits within four years of study (ARACIS, 2024), while in the UK, only a BMus(Hon) completes 240 credits, Royal College of Music in London, offering an early graduation option for a 120 ECTS credits (Diploma in HE), and for a 60 ECTS credits (Certificate in HE), (London, 2024). In the U.S.A. *calculating curricular structures, the Association uses a four-year degree program of 120 semester hours, or 180 quarter hours, as the basis for determining percentages of various components. For institutions with program requirements beyond 120 semester hours or 180 quarter hours, the combined percentage of the components will exceed 100%. For associate degrees, the basis is 60 semester hours or 90 quarter hours* (NASM, 2023-4).

If before the Bologna Process, all courses were mandatory for any university-admitted student, after implementation of Bologna, courses classified into (a) core or foundational courses, (b) general music courses, (c) vocal performance courses, and (d) elective courses. The last packet of classes, although elective for the students, usually comes in pairs, and it is chosen by the department's head at the beginning of the semester/academic year according to faculty needs. In addition to the bolded courses above, which were new at that particular time, a major change took place within the length of the courses. For example, if in the 1996-2001 curriculum, Italian and German were studied for five years, in the 2020-2024 track design the foreign language requirement was English for two years. The required Italian and German languages for at least one semester in any VP program were omitted here due to convenience. Similar to Music Theory, which was previously mandatory for 5 years, the latest curriculum offers it for two years. It is up to each department to design its curricula according to national and European regulations yet keeping an eye on student needs is also necessary. While the teaching course packet, which included Psychology, General Pedagogy and Vocal Pedagogy were mandatory before Bologna, it later became optional and it's currently integrated and taught by the Department of Education.

## Comparative Education - Analyses of VP Praxis in HEI - Romania Versus USA

According to the ARACIS standard requirements (ARACIS, 2024, p. 88), the highest percentage within the core of the VP curriculum is ascribed to the field subjects (up to 55%), which are: Applied Voice, IPA and Lyric Diction, Opera Workshop, History of Opera and Art Song Literature, Vocal Pedagogy, Acting for Singers, Stage Movement and Stage Make-up. In the US curricula, this percentage varies according to the institution's and degree's types (NASM, 2023-4). Nonetheless, several courses are found in all VP programs whether part of a professional degree, BM, or a liberal arts degree, BA.

**Applied Voice** is the main course taught every semester. The Romanian vocal performance curriculum splits the Applied Voice course into two courses:

- *Canto* is a compulsory 1-1 course whose main objective is to obtain competencies in classical singing. The syllabus, costumed nationally, includes acquired repertoire of the following historical periods: Baroque - for the freshman student (1<sup>st</sup> year of study); Classical - for the sophomore student (2<sup>nd</sup> year); Romantic - for the junior student (3<sup>rd</sup> year); and 20<sup>th</sup> century, respectively post-modern repertoire for the senior student (4<sup>th</sup> year). The course is one and a half academic hours, meaning 75 minutes weekly.
- *Lied-Oratorio* is also a 1-1 compulsory course added for the third and fourth year of vocal-performance studies and requires fulfillment of oratorio arias and art-song repertoire. Although the course's name implies the study of the German song only (*Lied*) - the term *Lied* being used in Romania to describe all art-song categories - the syllabus contains German *Lieder*, French *Melodies*, Spanish, Russian, Czech, English, Hungarian and Romanian art song cycles. The student benefits of an additional one-hour vocal instruction a week from the same or different voice faculty assigned.

The Applied Voice course in the US vocal performance programs is a one-hour weekly course with no repertoire constraints throughout the study years. This allows the student and the voice teacher to gear the vocal instruction based on student's continuous abilities and vocal inclinations within the classical frame. Although the student does not benefit from the same amount of vocal instruction as in the Romanian curriculum, what matters on both platforms is quality of instruction shaped on individual vocal needs. At the end of his third year of vocal studies the student must pass a half-hour Junior recital - presented in a hearing to the Jury and publicly in the department's concert season. If the student does not pass the half-hour recital as a Junior, he/she will not advance into the Senior year and will not yet prepare for the 45-minute concert required for the vocal performance degree completion.

**The International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) and Lyric Diction** in German, French, Italian, Spanish and English are at the core of all BM in vocal performance degrees in the USA. The undergraduate student studies the IPA, the phonetic and their symbols of the classical languages in singing, including the native one; the use of tongue, lip and air movement for vowel formation, vowel charts; rules and exceptions for open, close, long, short vowels in a specific language; consonants and their articulation; old language versus modern sung language, and phonetic transcription of studied repertoire. The competencies acquired through the completion of these courses are language accuracy, fluency and clear interpretation in any studied repertoire. The IPA is an essential tool for the 21<sup>st</sup>-century singer. If an international student does not fulfill the US core requirements, he/she must register for it during his/her graduate studies.

In Romania, the concept of precise phonation in classical singing based on scientific data has been overlooked throughout its 164 years of history. Most of the studied repertoire in the program has been for many years in the Italian language, reason for which today over 80% of opera houses' repertoire in the country consists of Italian operas. The Romanian curriculum for a BM in vocal performance includes studies of 1 or 2 years of a foreign language depending on the institution's choice. However, the study of a foreign language although essential, does not equal the study of IPA and lyric diction for singers. After teaching five years at the University of Mobile, Alabama, the Lyric Diction course was imported by the author to Brasov, at UniTBv in 2013 being the first Lyric Diction course in the VP program in Romania. Later on, Cluj and Constanta added the course to their VP requirements. The benefit of this course addition is both national and international: the academic transcript receives recognition and credit equivalation in all countries and universities where this course is taught, and it is a compulsory pre-requisite for advanced degrees in vocal performance: MM and DMA. Furthermore, the insertion of a 2-hour lyric diction class a week within the advance degrees in Romania presents the perspective of a new job title: that of a trained Lyric Diction coach within the national opera houses, who momentarily lack this position.

**Vocal Pedagogy** is a mandatory course for all bachelor and master programs in vocal performance in the Western curriculum. It is commonly a 2-credit class for a 2-hour weekly course. The syllabus covers the anatomy of the vocal apparatus, its functionality, the sound production and release, the technique of *appoggio* and *aggiustamento*, breath management exercises, vowel formants, the singer's timbre and registers, the *Fach*, the dynamic control in singing, the aspect of communication, aesthetics of timbre in vocal pedagogy, and health in singing. The most used textbook in American and other international universities is Richard Miller's *The Structure of Singing*, but not limited to it. The course is dense and an eye-opener for any novice of singing, and it is taught by a singer faculty specialized in vocal pedagogy.

In the Romanian HEIs, the equivalent of the Vocal Pedagogy course is a module of courses taken within both the Department of Education - which holds the jurisdiction of the class, and the Music Department. The first department offers courses in psychology and general education at Level 1 for bachelor candidates and Level 2 for Master candidates or post-graduate studies. These courses are the core of the pedagogical module. The Music Department handles one course in this module, *Specialized Didactics (Didactica Specialitatii)*, which comprises of one course and one laboratory. Only the laboratory is taught by a specialized faculty in the field and only at Level 1 (*Nivel I*). The pedagogical module is not mandatory for students. Therefore, students who do not aspire to a teaching career do not enroll in this module and do not acquire any scientific knowledge of voice and vocal pedagogy. Although some national vocal performance curriculums included a *Vocal Hygiene* course for the students, this does not suffice in shaping a well-prepared and informed singer at international standards. Since 1990, many textbooks have been published on *Specialized Didactics*, borrowing materials from the international vocal pedagogy literature already published.

While the following courses **History of German Lieder, History of French Mélodie, and History of Opera** may be considered mandatory for graduation in the US, the ARACIS standards show these as complementary courses.

One of the sought-after courses in a VP program is the **Opera Workshop**, generally a 2-credit course meeting 2 to 4 hours a week and consisting of setting on stage a full-production in most respectful HEI or opera scenes in resource-limited music departments. In the US, this

course is frequently managed by a vocal performance faculty with stage-directing flair or experience, who understands the vocal needs and demands of the students. In other cases, the Opera Workshop director is a full-time conductor (commonly a former opera singer), with strong knowledge in the field. Whether a full-time voice faculty or opera conductor within the department, one decides on the repertoire to be studied and publicly performed. One works closely with a rehearsal pianist who, too, is accustomed with the opera repertoire and the singers' needs to ensure the musical preparation of the students. After this phase, the stage director comes to set the music on stage. The stage-director is either hired externally for the production only, or he is a voice faculty with knowledge and teaching experience. In high-profile institutions, a set designer, a custom designer, a hair and make-up artist, back-stage technical personnel are involved in the making of the full production. A full opera production includes the department's orchestra, in most schools where there is one. The outcome is an extraordinary musical bond of a team that learns how to work closely work with each other. Partially funded by its community, the production may have a high social impact.

At the three former music conservatories of Romania: Cluj, Bucharest, Iasi, the importance of the Opera Workshop within the program is well enough understood, students and faculty aiming to complete a full production with or without an orchestra. However, in small music departments, there is no director of the course, to supervise the full process of the course and to ensure that student receive their performing experience. The course is shared between two or three faculty members: an accompanist, a stage director and, sometimes, a conductor none of them being involved in teaching voice students and/or teaching within the vocal performance program. Such is the case with UniTBv, and the effect is visible, especially in the ability to shape teams. Even though the number of hours is 6 per week for this course, (or 12 hours a week before Bologna) the outcome may not be compared with a 2-4-hour class in the American curriculum, where strong managerial skills and vision of Voice professionals lead the way.

**Concert Music Credit** (*Practica Artistică*) is currently a 3-hour credit course in the vocal performance program demanding student participation - through singing - in at least one public performance per semester and attendance at school's events. In the US, the Concert Music requirements indicate singing involvement in a weekly Voice Audition and a monthly Voice Seminar, in addition to attendance at school events. The student is graded with a *satisfied/not satisfied*, whereas in Romania the student receives an actual grade each semester throughout his/her four years of studies.

## **Conclusion**

After Bologna, *even if the national regulations would had been clear and consistent, they may not have been applied on the ground* (Geven, 2015). While the implementation of the Bologna System allowed freedom within the VP curriculum's design, this freedom hasn't been always used in student's interest. Due to the program's decrease in length, in comparison with its prior designs, long-hour courses required faculty to adapt their courses to a more intense, dynamic and interactive teaching approach. Nonetheless, the Romanian faculty body currently in the HE system still comprises old-school faculty members who taught before 1989, which makes change at practical level difficult. Meanwhile, the younger generation faculty with no international HE exposure, graduating all degrees at the same institution continued on a similar path before 1989, with a teaching input-output alike or even decreased. The renewal of practices will require even more time than anticipated, while Gen Z fully attending universities' courses will demand more strongly a change in teaching strategy.

One of the major advantages that Bologna brought, was that internationalization of student Transcripts/Diploma Supplements, which are now bilingual: in Romanian and one *other foreign language of widespread circulation* (Damian, 2005), English being the case. Although *legal changes do not immediately induce variations in practice or mentality* (Curaj, 2015), Romanian HEIs *have taken serious steps towards increasing mobility and exchanges for students and teachers, [...] increasing international and intercultural understanding* (Wells & Florea, 2011).

Table 4: Bologna System Implementation

Advantages	Challenges	Risks
Student mobility based on ECTS	Abolish the private lesson system prior to HEI admission with teachers of admission committees	Mass education may weaken the sector: student competences on papers versus practice
Degree recognition outside of Romania	Renewal of teaching faculty with non-SRI related members	Graduates of VP distance study-program have limited skills at graduation
Graduate studies accessibility in other countries	Managerial vision needed in interest to all stakeholders of HEI	Graduates of other bachelor's degrees admitted in VP graduate programs without sufficient credit and practical proficiency in VP are employed in pre-HEI as voice specialists
Internationalization	Quality assurance transparency tools	
International job opportunities		

While embracing the benefits of change, the author's commitment to national and international academia and to the singing community is expressed in the statement: healthy and efficient teaching and singing unite the mind and the hearth within the human body so that one coherent and honest entity is created. It is an athletic process that becomes art when the power of self-expression - in both singing and teaching - is truly genuine. Staying devoted to this synchronizing principle is author's goal while nurturing students on their path of self-commitment.

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**Contact email:** [buhaiciuc.mihaela@unitbv.ro](mailto:buhaiciuc.mihaela@unitbv.ro)