

Summary of the thesis

Title: Interdisciplinary curriculum development: Service Learning and Educational Values of Human-Animal Interactions

Domain: Sciences of Education

Candidate: Alina Simona Rusu, Associate Professor, PhD

Alina Simona Rusu (ASR, 45 years), biologist and psychologist, is currently Associated Professor at the Department of Special Education, Faculty of Psychology and Sciences of Education, Babes-Bolyai University (BBU), Cluj-Napoca, Romania and Fulbright Ambassador for Romanian Academic Environment (2018-2023). Since 2013 to present, she is the director of the Postgraduate Course “*Animal Assisted Therapy and Activities for Persons with Special Needs*”, hosted by the Department of Special Education, Faculty of Psychology and Sciences of Education, BBU, in collaboration to Faculty of Veterinary Medicine, University of Agricultural Sciences and Veterinary Medicine, Cluj-Napoca. This postgraduate course is currently the unique form of academic training at National level in the area of animal-assisted interventions. Her teaching and research activity is guided by a strong interdisciplinary approach, covering several domains, such as: Animal Psychology, Service-Learning, Evolutionary Psychology, Psychobiology of Sexuality and Applied values of Human-Animal Interactions (practice, research and education/ animal-assisted pedagogy).

In terms of *professional experience* and of the dynamic of her achievements in the field of academic education (teaching and research), ASR has an experience of 22 years, being initially employed as a teaching assistant at the Faculty of Biology and Geology, BBU, from 1996 to 2000, followed by a PhD in Natural Sciences in 2004, at University of Zurich (Department of Animal Behavior), Switzerland, with a complete PhD Fellowship from the Swiss National Fond (September 2000 - April 2004). From 2004 to present, ASR has been employed in various *academic positions* at the Faculty of Psychology and Sciences of Education, Babes-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania, as it follows: Psychology Department (research assistant), Clinical Psychology and Psychotherapy Department (postdoctoral researcher, lecturer and associate professor). Since 2013 to

present, ASR is Associate Professor at the Department of Special Education (<http://psihoped.psiedu.ubbcluj.ro/>), FPSE, BBU.

The subjects/disciplines ASR is currently teaching at undergraduate and Master levels are: Animal-Assisted Therapy and Activities, Animal Psychology, Psychobiology of Sexuality and Applications of Positive Psychology in Inclusive Education. All these subjects are connected with interactive programs addressed to students (volunteering activity and/or field education), being structured not only on competencies basis in connection to the curricula, but also community-oriented, such as: humane-education programs targeting the attitudes towards animals and promoting of responsible ownership in the local community (e.g. Day of Human-Animal Interactions) and the Sexual and Reproductive Health education (e.g. the Days of Sexual Education/ Student-for-Student Educational project).

In parallel with the above mentioned academic positions, ASR was also involved in *Institutional administrative roles*, as it follows: Chancellor of the Faculty of Psychology and Sciences of Education, BBU (2008 – 2012), Vice-Dean of the Faculty of Psychology and Sciences of Education, BBU /Tasks: Quality Assurance and Communication with students. From 2013 to October 2016, ASR was one of the members of the Executive Board of the Student College of Academic Performance of Babes-Bolyai University (<http://cppa.stud.ubbcluj.ro/>). From 2014 to 2017, ASR was in charge with the coordination of the Office for Students with Disabilities of BBU, Cluj-Napoca, Romania.

Her PhD title in Natural Sciences/ Animal Behavior at University of Zurich, Switzerland, as well as the publications related to it and those that have followed in the area of animal behavior/ animal communication and the therapeutic values of human-animal interactions, especially in the field on animal inclusion in the therapeutic settings of children with Autistic Spectrum Disorder, were already referred as a stone-ground for the Habilitation title in Psychology of ASR. The Habilitation certificate in Psychology was issued in August 2013 by the Romanian National Ministry of Education No. 4458 MD/ 09.08.2013, based on the Habilitation thesis entitled *Interdisciplinary research of human-animal interactions (animal assisted therapy) and human behavior (evolutionary approach)*.

It is important to specify that, although from the moment of receiving her PhD title in 2004 up to now, ASR has a list of ISI/WOS and BDI publications of more than 70 titles, with 49 papers being WOS indexed, in this material addressing the **Habilitation in Sciences of Education**, there will be discussed and referred only the studies and the achievements that are connected to the domain of Sciences of Education. Hence, the publications and their afferent citations that have included in the candidate's documents proving the meeting of the Habilitation minimal criteria for the domain of Sciences of Education have been selected accordingly. ASR has currently a Hirsch-index of 13 on Google Scholar and 7 on ISI Web of Science, with a sum of ISI WOS citations of 229 (without self-citations) and an average of citations/ item of 4.9.

The habilitation thesis covers three topics of research in the field of Sciences of Education, in which the candidate has already published several papers and research projects, as well as an institutional international project: (1). Service-Learning – an innovative pedagogy for civic engaged students; (2). Premises for Humane-Education programs in Romania: Attitudes towards animals and (3). Interdisciplinary framework for curriculum development: Integrating Service-Learning and Human-Animal interactions. In line with the institutional models of Service-Learning described in the literature, an important career plan of Alina S. Rusu is to propose a *path of transition from volunteering activities to Service-Learning components in connection to curricular content of specific disciplines*. The second direction of career plan is *to continue the process of interdisciplinary curriculum development* combining Service-Learning with human-animal interactions, by planning a focus group investigation with experts in animal-oriented professions. Following this qualitative investigation, the next steps of testing the interdisciplinary curriculum will be performed, based on the frame provided by the 10-generic points model of curriculum design (Kirkpartick, 1994) adapted for interdisciplinary curriculum by Modo & Kinchin (2011). Specifically, this adapted model refers to the following three manifestation of curriculum development: the planned curriculum, the created or delivered curriculum, and the experienced curriculum. Also, due to the increasing number of evidence-based reports indicating the educational needs of students interested in helping others professions, including animal-oriented professions, toward the prevention of compassion fatigue and moral distress, the career

plan of Alina S. Rusu includes the development of a learning objective addressing these dimension, in collaboration with international experts in the area of social work practice and education. In conclusion, Service-Learning programs involving students in animal-related professions have the potential not only to facilitate the civic participation of students and academic staff, thus fulfilling one important component of the Third Mission of Higher Education Institutions, but also to provide an optimal educational field for responsible attitudes toward animals (at individual and society levels).