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Short bio:

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Paper

Beyond Employability: Student Experience and Pedagogical Challenges in Practitioner-Led Higher Education

Abstract

Whereas in most higher education institutions the relationship between academic training and the labour market is mediated through external employer involvement, less attention has been paid to institutions in which professionals themselves constitute the main teaching body. At the French University in Armenia (UFAR), teaching across all programmes is delivered mainly by active practitioners creating a distinctive model of professionally oriented higher education associated with strong graduate employment outcomes.

This paper examines the institutional mechanisms supporting this model and students' experiences of practitioner-led teaching. Drawing on institutional quality assurance practices and a mixed-methods analysis of student course ratings and open-ended comments collected over four academic years (2022–2023 to 2025–2026), the study explores the opportunities and challenges associated with practitioners as the principal providers of teaching.

The findings indicate that students value the practical relevance and professional expertise of practitioners, while expressing recurring concerns about pedagogical methods, assessment practices and course coherence. The analysis suggests that professional expertise does not automatically translate into pedagogical effectiveness or into coherent alignment between learning outcomes and assessment. It highlights the need for stronger programme-level coordination, particularly when teaching responsibilities are distributed among professionals whose primary activities lie outside higher education.

Introduction

Employability has become an increasingly prominent concern in European higher education, reflecting changing relationships between universities, the labour market and society (Prokou, 2008). However, its role as a core institutional purpose remains debated, particularly in relation to universities' broader intellectual and social missions (Tight, 2023). Moreover, employability extends beyond obtaining a job to encompass the knowledge, skills and personal attributes required to enter, remain in and adapt to changing professional contexts (Yorke, 2006).

In response, higher education institutions have increasingly adopted approaches that bring academic learning closer to professional practice, including internships, employer partnerships and work-based learning (Helyer & Lee, 2014; Scandurra et al., 2024). The involvement of practising professionals in university teaching represents another way of connecting academic knowledge with the world of work (Gentelli, 2015). However, as Shulman (1986) argues, effective teaching requires more than subject knowledge: it also involves transforming disciplinary knowledge into forms that learners can understand. This raises an important question for quality assurance (QA): how can institutions preserve the professional relevance of teaching while ensuring pedagogical quality and alignment between learning outcomes, teaching and assessment?

Research on practitioner-led teaching has highlighted both its potential and its pedagogical challenges. Gentelli (2015) found that students valued industry expertise while also emphasising the importance of small-group discussions and continuity in learning. Dickinson et al. (2022) identified tensions between professional identities and academic expectations among practitioners transitioning into university teaching. More broadly, van Dijk et al. (2020) identified educational design, teaching, assessment and professional development as key dimensions of university teacher expertise. These studies distinguish professional expertise from pedagogical expertise. However, they pay less attention to institutions whose teaching model is built mainly around practising professionals, rather than using them alongside permanent academic staff. When most courses are taught by people whose main work lies outside higher education, keeping courses coherent and ensuring that students progressively achieve the programme learning outcomes becomes a problem of institutional coordination. Using the case of the French University in Armenia (UFAR), this study examines the institutional mechanisms that support practitioner-led teaching and how students experience it. It treats programme-level coordination as an institutional condition for sustaining constructive alignment (Biggs & Tang, 2011).

UFAR's Practitioner-Led Educational Model

UFAR's teaching model rests on two features that set it apart from most Armenian universities: teaching delivered mainly by practicing professionals, and a transnational partnership with French universities. From the third year of study, tutors from partner French universities also contribute to teaching, bringing an additional academic perspective. This combination connects professional practice with academic knowledge within a transnational educational setting.

Most tutors combine university teaching with activities in their professional sectors. Although they bring valuable practical knowledge into the classroom, they may have different levels of experience in course planning, structuring learning activities, designing assessment and providing feedback. Their professional commitments may also limit the time available for joint course planning and pedagogical development. Graduate outcome data indicate a strong connection with the labour market: in the 2025 alumni survey, 85% of the 296 respondents had found employment within six to nine months of graduation, and 92% of those employed were working in positions related to their field of study. Although these outcomes indicate the professional relevance of the model, they do not in themselves establish the quality of teaching and learning. Drawing on student evaluations and an analysis of institutional quality assurance practices, the study examines how course-level pedagogical difficulties relate to programme-level coherence and how institutional QA can respond to both.

Data Sources and Methodology

The study emerged from an institutional research initiative aimed at examining student evaluation data accumulated through UFAR's internal quality assurance processes. Drawing on existing institutional data, it sought both to inform quality enhancement at UFAR and to contribute to broader discussions on the pedagogical challenges of practitioner-led higher education. This approach builds on the potential of secondary data analysis to address new research questions using existing datasets (Cave & von Stumm, 2021; Smith, 2008).

A mixed-methods design was adopted, combining quantitative analysis of student course ratings with thematic analysis of open-ended comments. The two components were examined in relation to the dimensions of the evaluation questionnaire, allowing numerical patterns to be interpreted alongside students' written accounts.

The dataset covers four academic years, from 2022–2023 to 2025–2026, and includes specialty courses taught by Armenian practicing professionals. Courses delivered by tutors from partner French universities, foreign language courses and courses delivered by permanent researchers and other university staff were excluded. The quantitative analysis included courses with at least ten responses, resulting in annual samples of 103, 152, 90 and 94 course evaluations. Overall, 234 distinct courses and 11,574 responses were analysed, representing 95% of all responses collected. The overall response rate was 10.7%, calculated against course enrolment. Course-level differences between dimensions were tested using a sign test, with Holm correction for multiple comparisons.

The qualitative analysis covered all substantive open-ended comments collected during the same period. Blank responses, non-informative answers (e.g. 'no comment') and emoji-only responses were excluded. Of the 9,648 eligible comments, 6,114 received at least one thematic code. Comments were machine-translated into English and checked by the author, with the original-language versions kept for reference.

Thematic analysis combined deductive and inductive coding. The initial framework was derived from the dimensions of the evaluation questionnaire and then refined through iterative coding and review, as further recurring concerns emerged from the comments. This process produced six thematic categories. MAXQDA AI Assist was used to identify and code relevant segments and to classify each coded comment as critical, positive or mixed/neutral. The author reviewed all coding and polarity assignments for relevance and consistency. No independent second-coder reliability check was carried out.

All data were anonymised prior to analysis, and their use for this study was authorised by the university.

Data Analysis

In line with the aim of the study, the quantitative analysis examines two dimensions of practitioner-led teaching: professional relevance, reflecting the contribution of practicing professionals, and the pedagogical dimension of the learning experience, particularly teaching methods and assessment clarity. The analysis focuses on annual mean ratings and course-level comparisons between these dimensions.

Table 1. Annual mean ratings for selected dimensions (scale: 1–5)

Item	2022–23	2023–24	2024–25	2025–26
Professional relevance	3.9	4.1	4.4	4.6
Teaching methods	3.1	3.6	3.4	4.1
Assessment clarity	2.9	3.1	3.2	3.7
N. of course evaluations	103	152	90	94

Note: Results are reported for the institution as a whole; faculty- and course-level results are not reported for reasons of institutional confidentiality.

Across the four academic years, professional relevance received consistently higher mean ratings than teaching methods and assessment clarity. At course level, professional relevance was rated higher than pacing and scheduling in 74% of courses, achievement of objectives in 69%, assessment clarity in 61% and learning materials in 59%. These differences were statistically significant. The difference in relation to teaching methods was smaller and did not reach statistical significance. The pattern was also observed in both early (years 1–2) and later (years 3 and above) years of study, with no significant differences between the two groups.

Table 2. Courses in which professional relevance was rated higher than pedagogical dimensions

Professional relevance rated higher than	Courses	Share	Adjusted p-value
Pacing / schedule	170 of 230	74%	<0.001
Achievement of objectives	157 of 227	69%	<0.001
Assessment clarity	138 of 228	61%	0.005
Learning materials	134 of 229	59%	0.024
Teaching methods	127 of 225	56%	0.06 (n.s.)

As a robustness check, the analysis was repeated on the 42 course evaluations with a participation rate of at least 40%. Professional relevance remained rated above teaching methods in all four years and above assessment clarity in three of the four years. The smaller sample, however, did not allow these differences to reach statistical significance. Although mean ratings for teaching methods were lower than for professional relevance in every year, this gap appears to be concentrated in a subset of courses rather than shared across most courses.

The qualitative analysis identified six main themes reflecting students' experiences of professional expertise, teaching practices and course organisation. Table 3 presents their frequency and the polarity of the comments assigned to each theme.

Table 3. Frequency and polarity of themes identified in student comments

Main theme	Related questionnaire dimension	Comments (n)	% of coded comments	Critical	Positive	Mixed / neutral
Explaining and structuring content	Teaching methods	3,291	53.8%	48.3%	26.9%	24.8%
Assessment transparency and consistency	Assessment clarity	1,622	26.5%	64.4%	8.8%	26.9%
Time and volume of content	Pacing / schedule	1,409	23.0%	65.4%	8.5%	26.0%
Professional expertise and practical examples	Professional relevance	978	16.0%	31.7%	41.6%	26.7%
Learning materials and online platform	Learning materials	773	12.6%	58.3%	9.6%	32.1%
Alignment of content, objectives and examinations	Objectives achieved	613	10.0%	63.6%	6.9%	29.5%

Note: The analysis includes 6,114 comments containing at least one thematic code. A comment could be assigned to multiple themes; consequently, theme frequencies and percentages do not sum to 100%. Polarity percentages are calculated within each theme.

The qualitative findings reveal a contrast between the value students attach to professional expertise and their perceptions of pedagogical organisation. Explanation and structuring of content was the most frequently identified theme (53.8%), while professional expertise received comparatively balanced feedback, with more positive (41.6%) than critical comments (31.7%). This suggests that students

recognise the value of practitioners' experience while also identifying difficulties in how knowledge is explained and organised.

The strongest concerns relate to assessment transparency (64.4% critical), time and volume of content (65.4% critical) and alignment between content, learning objectives and examinations (63.6% critical). These patterns are consistent with the quantitative findings on assessment clarity, pacing and achievement of objectives, and point to challenges extending beyond individual classroom delivery to course design and assessment. For teaching methods, the qualitative evidence is more pronounced than the course-level ratings: explaining and structuring content was the most frequent theme, with 48.3% of related comments being critical.

Limitations

The study measures students' perceptions rather than teaching effectiveness or learning achievement. Although the dataset covers a substantial number of course evaluations, participation was voluntary and the overall response rate was low; non-response bias therefore cannot be excluded. Students with particularly positive or negative experiences may have been more likely to respond; consequently, the polarity distributions should be interpreted as reflecting participating students rather than the entire student population. Finally, the analysis concerns a single institution and does not include a comparison group from a conventional academic model.

Quality Assurance Challenges in a Practitioner-Led Educational Model

The implementation of quality assurance at UFAR raises questions that extend beyond monitoring individual teaching performance. While student evaluations capture students' perceptions of course relevance and teachers' professional contribution, they do not necessarily establish whether professional knowledge is translated into a coherent learning experience. In a practitioner-led model, diverse professional backgrounds enrich teaching but may also complicate the coordination of content, the avoidance of repetition and the progressive development of knowledge and competencies across courses. Excessive content volume and insufficient learning time may therefore reflect not only individual teaching practices but also broader curriculum design and coordination issues, including the risk of overlap between courses.

The findings point to a distinction between individual pedagogical responsibility and institutional responsibility for programme-level coherence. Constructive alignment (Biggs & Tang, 2011) is most often applied within individual courses, focusing on the relationship between intended learning outcomes, teaching activities and assessment. However, in a practitioner-led model such as UFAR's, where each course may be taught by a different professional, alignment must also be considered across courses. Although individual tutors can organise and assess their own courses, ensuring that these contributions collectively support programme learning outcomes requires institutional coordination.

UFAR has several institutional mechanisms through which these perspectives can be brought together. Student evaluations are regularly conducted and analysed. At programme level, the *Conseils de*

perfectionnement, involving academic staff, students, alumni and employer representatives, provide a forum for examining programme relevance, structure and outcomes. Programme self-evaluation and internal audit processes, required within the Armenian accreditation framework, offer further opportunities to examine programme objectives, learning outcomes, curriculum structure, teaching and assessment. However, the existence of these mechanisms does not automatically ensure that the evidence they generate is systematically connected. A key challenge is to link course evaluation findings with programme-level deliberations and the follow-up of recommendations.

To support this connection, UFAR is piloting an online curriculum mapping platform built on its academic database. The platform maps how individual course learning outcomes contribute to programme learning outcomes, indicating the expected level of proficiency for each contribution: introductory, practice or mastery. It makes the progression of outcomes across study years and potential overlaps between courses visible. It also flags programme learning outcomes that are not fully covered, for example those that never reach mastery level, as well as courses that are not linked to any programme outcome. Currently used by programme deans, the platform is intended to be extended to teachers, allowing them to consult and validate their course outcomes and contribute to programme alignment asynchronously. This is particularly relevant in a model where practitioners have limited availability for collective planning. Although its impact on students' learning experiences cannot yet be assessed, the platform provides a basis for more systematic curriculum review and future monitoring of alignment.

Alongside this structural mechanism, pedagogical support needs to take account of practitioners' professional constraints. Short, practical guidance is more realistic than lengthy training programmes. Following the ANQA and Hcéres accreditation processes, training sessions for groups of tutors and deans were organised by UFAR in collaboration with ANQA. The outcomes of these activities informed the development of a practical reference framework, subsequently approved by the Board of Trustees.

The framework provides guidance on formulating measurable learning outcomes using Bloom's taxonomy, mapping the contribution of individual courses to programme-level learning outcomes at introductory, practice and mastery levels, and ensuring alignment between intended learning outcomes, teaching methods and assessment procedures. It also establishes links between student evaluation data, the conclusions of the *Conseils de perfectionnement* and the findings of programme self-evaluations reviewed by external experts, bringing these sources of evidence together within a structured cycle of continuous improvement. Together, these measures combine programme-level coordination with a shared institutional framework adapted to the specific characteristics of UFAR's practitioner-led teaching model.

Conclusion and Implications for Quality Assurance

The experience of UFAR illustrates both the value and the complexity of practitioner-led higher education. Strong graduate employment outcomes confirm the professional relevance of this model, but they do not in themselves demonstrate the quality of the learning experience. Students' evaluations show that professional relevance was consistently rated more highly than pedagogical dimensions, while comments on assessment clarity, the pacing and volume of content, and the alignment of content

with examinations were predominantly critical. Professional expertise, in other words, does not automatically translate into pedagogical effectiveness or programme coherence.

For internal quality assurance, the central challenge is to ensure pedagogical coherence without undermining the professional diversity that gives this model its value. In this context, student evaluations serve as a valuable early signal of pedagogical difficulties, but their value for quality assurance depends on how systematically their findings are connected to programme-level review and follow-up. At UFAR, the curriculum mapping platform and the institutional programme review framework represent steps in this direction, although concerns about content volume and pacing remain an area for further institutional attention. The objective is not to impose a uniform approach to teaching, but to develop institutional arrangements that support pedagogical development while preserving professional authenticity.

The findings also raise questions for external quality assurance. Institutional capacity in practitioner-led institutions cannot be assessed solely through indicators developed for conventional academic structures, such as the proportion of permanent or doctorate-holding teaching staff. Evaluators should give particular attention to how teaching is coordinated across professionals, how pedagogical support is provided and how coherence is ensured between professional expertise, programme learning outcomes and assessment, including evidence of curriculum mapping, shared assessment expectations across courses and the follow-up of identified gaps or overlaps. These considerations are consistent with ESG Standards 1.2 (design and approval of programmes), 1.5 (teaching staff) and 1.9 (on-going monitoring and periodic review of programmes) (ENQA et al., 2015).

Although based on a single institutional case, the findings may be relevant to other institutions that rely substantially on practising professionals as their main teaching body, particularly where academic co-teaching is limited and opportunities for collective curriculum planning are constrained.

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