

Gen Z and The Study of Accounting at the University

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"Education is not the learning of facts, but the training of the mind to think." — Albert Einstein

Abstract: Today, Generation Z (Gen Z) is on the student bench. The main focus of this article is what university accounting professors can offer to this generation of students and what challenges they face. On one hand, everyone is familiar with Generation Z, but on the other hand, they are completely new in a professional context. Are accounting professors using the qualities of this generation correctly and optimally, or are they unable to wake up their interest? In the context of these reflections, the main objective of the article is to present the approaches of university accounting professors in teaching Gen Z and the challenges related to their full engagement. The study focuses on the generational profile of students and the methods that can be used to improve the learning process and primarily concerns the practice of teaching accounting in Bulgaria. It can be said that the article is limited to accounting education and the specific social group of those born from the late 1990s to the early 2010s. Other academic disciplines are not analyzed, not is a comparison made with other generations. The study primarily employs an empirical approach. The conclusions reached are related to Gen Z's high digital proficiency and short attention span, as well as the evident need for interactive and practical teaching methods. The author hopes that the findings of the article will influence the teaching strategies of accounting professors and, in turn, stimulate students' critical thinking. It is no coincidence that the introductory words cite the great Albert Einstein's thought "education is not the learning of facts, but the training of the mind to think", a statement truly worth reflecting upon...

Key words: Gen Z, Accounting, Study of accounting at the university

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1. Introduction

Gen Z is in the classroom, sitting on the student bench. On one hand, they are often described as "too dependent on social media and smartphones, ...unable to communicate face-to-face, ...spoiled, ...impatient, ...unable to focus, ...overly sensitive, ...unwilling to work long hours and prioritize work, ...addicted to social media." On the other hand, they are "technologically proficient, ...engaged in social causes, ...innovative, ...tolerant and inclusive, ...adaptable and resilient, ...demanding transparency and clarity." (TSD Team, 2024). They are simply who they are! Are university professors effectively utilizing the strengths of this generation, or are they struggling to capture their interest? The focus of this article is to examine specific questions related to how accounting should be taught in classrooms and how professors can adapt their teaching methods to engage Gen Z in accounting studies.

2. Generational Profile of Gen Z

Understanding the generational profile is an important factor in competence and effectiveness in accounting education. The need for this awareness is increasingly recognized. Each generational profile is linked to specific needs, attitudes, values, motivations, and thinking patterns of the respective group. Gen Z includes individuals born from the late 1990s to the early 2010s. (Filipova, 2022). A study on the generational characteristics of Bulgaria's workforce, conducted as part of a project financed by the Operational Program "Human Resources Development" (Bulgarian Chamber of Commerce, 2020), highlights several relevant aspects:

1. Cultural-historical and social context – They do not accept the status quo;

2. Dominant values – They are inquisitive and curious, focused on continuous learning and development, but not in a traditional, conservative way;

3. Work motivation – They are interested in meaningful work and are driven by opportunities for education and self-improvement;

4. Attitudes towards leadership – They value progressive thinking from their leaders;

5. New technologies – They perceive new technologies as a natural and integral part of life;

6. Attitudes toward learning and development – They prefer e-learning over traditional educational methods.

Accounting Education at the University

Accounting education falls within the social sciences, forming a key part of business education by providing knowledge and skills related to accounting practices and principles. The question of how to teach Gen Z is complex. On one hand, professors must consider the generational profile of students, which influences their learning way and cognitive processes. On the other hand, traditional, conservative, and classical understandings of higher education emphasize that science is being taught—not merely a collection of empirical knowledge and facts. Additionally, there are high expectations for the use of technology and digital resources in education, along with the dominance of social networks as a learning platform and lifestyle, amid increasing global interconnectedness. In line with these reflections, a positive approach would be to seek and establish a balance of interests, aligning with the author's understanding on accounting education for Gen Z. At the same time, it is important to clarify that discussing the content of what is taught falls outside the scope of this article. Thus, through several proposed recommendations, efforts could be supported to assist professors and fulfill the objectives of this article:

A. Technology, Digitalization, and Global Connectivity in Education

The visions of higher education institutions and university professors regarding the resource availability for thematic units are different. Gen Z experienced remote learning during their secondary education, leading to high expectations for digital integration in university studies. The answer to this expectation is systematic adaptation, ensuring modern and effective teaching methods. Recommended actions:

1. Utilize training platforms, regardless of students' learning format;

2. Ensure that resources, textbooks, and study guides are digital;

3. Upload learning materials to platforms in advance, allowing students to access them during lectures;

4. Use real-world examples from companies, with current financial data;

5. Implement learning applications for knowledge assessment during lectures (Using Kahoot! for Educational Purposes - <https://kahoot.com/>. Kahoot! is a Norwegian online learning platform based on game mechanics. Users can generate multiple-choice quizzes, accessible via a web browser, QR code, or the Kahoot! app. The platform is available in 17 languages, but Bulgarian is not yet an option—however, its accessibility continues to expand);

6. Record lectures in real time and integrate them into learning modules;

7. Ensure lecture recordings are available to students after class;

These recommendations stem from the fact that Gen Z learns differently, primarily through experience and independent reasoning. Additional support for accounting education:

8. Develop demo versions of accounting software, specifically designed for classroom use. This creates a strong foundation for problem-solving in business practices, fostering case-based learning rather than pre-packaged concepts. In a controlled environment guided by educators, students simulate real business scenarios, helping them understand accounting even without prior work experience;

Another important aspect of business practice is the increasing globalization and interconnectedness of enterprises, as well as the growing role of accounting as the language of business. Additionally, more and more international companies are outsourcing part or all of their accounting services. In this context, the final recommendation from the first group of proposals is:

9. In university accounting education for Gen Z, English accounting terminology should be introduced.

Gen Z was born into a vastly different world in terms of access to information and life experiences. The answers to the question "How does Gen Z learn?" (McCrory, 2022) can help professors structure their teaching methods over time. Research indicates that: - 12% of their time is spent listening; - 38% is spent reading; - 51% is spent doing (hands-on learning)

HOW DOES GEN Z LEARN?

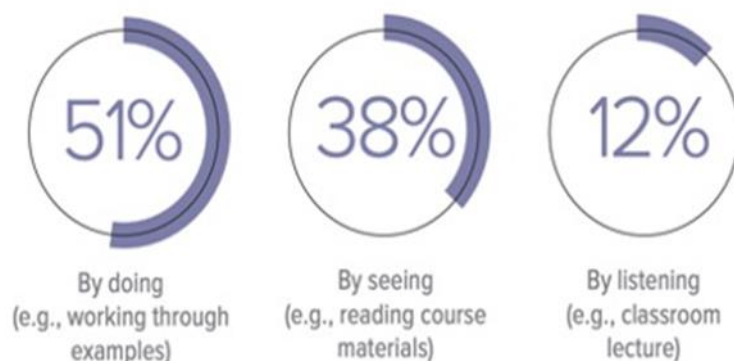


Figure 1. 10 Trends in the Era of Generation Z College Students by Jamie McCrary

Extrapolated to a 45-minute class session, the study's findings suggest the following time distribution:

- Approximately 5 minutes for the lecturer to speak;
- Approximately 17 minutes for students to read materials;
- Approximately 23 minutes for hands-on work using examples.

B. Generational Characteristics in the Learning Style and Cognition of Gen Z

Accounting course content is delivered and practiced during lectures and/or seminar sessions. The focus of the discussion shifts from the traditional question of whether lectures and seminars serve as effective learning spaces and whether they inspire students, to the question of how they should be organized to help students better understand the course material, aligning with their learning style. In this context, partial implementation of flipped teaching (flipped classroom) could be considered as a strategy.

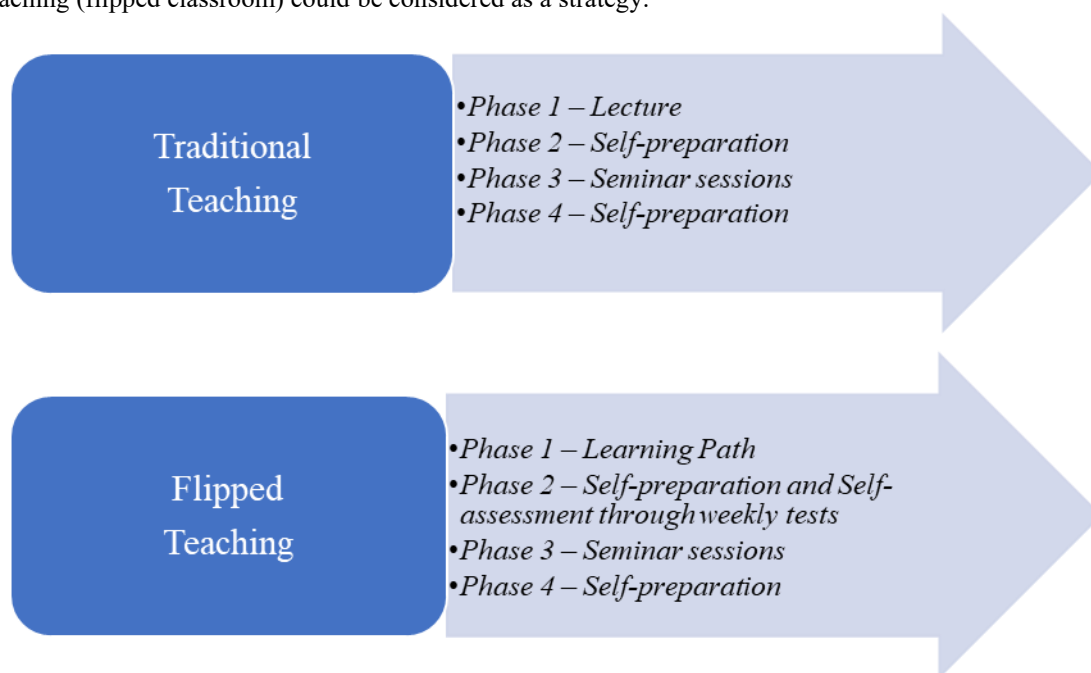


Figure 2. Traditional Teaching vs Flipped Teaching

In the Learning Path, the learning objectives are clearly defined, outlining the knowledge acquired and presenting a detailed content structure. The content is supported by interactive presentations and videos from the lecturer and/or external experts, short clips, tables, examples, and real-world case studies with solutions.

In a flipped classroom approach, before Phase 3 – Seminar Sessions, students have independently completed:

1. During Phase 1 – Students have carefully reviewed the content of the Learning Path, taken notes, made summaries, and are expected to have questions. They may also be assigned to create mind maps (A mind map is a visual tool that helps organize and structure information. It typically consists of: - A central idea or theme; - Branches connecting related concepts, subtopics, and ideas) based on the Learning Path or specific sections of it;

2. During Phase 2 – Students prepare independently. Students have completed the tests and now have insights into their performance and knowledge gaps.

During seminar sessions, there are no summaries or repetitions instead, questions are addressed, and students work on additional case studies. The professor takes on the role of a moderator rather than a traditional lecturer. Their work on preparing the Learning Path and self-assessment tests is shifted earlier in the timeline.

The key issue being emphasized is the expanding understanding of accounting education at the university, now reflecting more on self-directed learning and hands-on practice. Students are encouraged toward critical thinking and creative knowledge acquisition. Learning becomes autonomous, regardless of time and place.

This naturally raises the questions: Can traditional accounting education, using conventional methods in a traditional university, effectively meet the learning needs of Gen Z? Should changes be made or should they not?

C. Understanding Tradition, Conservatism, and Classical Approaches in Higher Education

For Gen Z, peer learning and recommendations are often more effective than guidance from professors. University professors are sometimes older, which has both advantages and challenges:

- Advantages – Experience, expertise, and mentorship;
- Challenges – Adapting to new technologies and communication differences.

A balanced approach is to encourage multigenerational teaching teams, incorporating tutors into the process. Tutors are top-performing students from upper-level courses who participate in seminar sessions, preparing tutorials. Their contributions could be beneficial across all levels of education.

At the University Gen Z should be immersed in scientific knowledge to unleash their creative pursuits. The education they receive must inspire and cultivate responsibility, encourage critical thinking, and develop a flexible intellect. In other words, it is time to move beyond superficial teaching and condescending attitudes. It is crucial to listen to and understand this generation, which searches for meaning in everything.

3. Conclusion

There is no standard model or formula... The topic of accounting education at the university is as old as it is new. Gen Z builds its own critical thinking and cognitive experience, defending its viewpoints based on facts found online. They think and share everything publicly. It is worth reflecting on Einstein's words: "Education is not the learning of facts, but the training of the mind to think." ...

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