



The Challenges of Higher Education Reform in Romania

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Abstract

As in many countries in Eastern and Central Europe, higher education in Romania has experienced dramatic changes following the economic and political transformations after the communist regime. The higher education architectural framework has gone through various stages, and it is still in an ongoing process. Starting from 1990, new initiatives, through legal acts or procedures, liberalized and democratized the higher education system by changes and modernization of the former communist legislation. The development of private universities, the fake university autonomy, the new public financing mechanism, the quality assurance mechanism, along with the provisions of the Bologna Declaration provided the context for reforming. The Education Law no. 1/2011 was highly influenced by the adoption of the National Pact for education, endorsed by all political parties, giving strong reasons for change: the need for curricular reform, the low level of scientific production, the lack of diversification of universities, the low-level of university autonomy, the miss functions in the university management and leadership, the need for a more student centered approach, the low access of rural and disadvantaged groups to higher education system, the low position of the Romanian universities in the international rankings etc. The new National Education Law included a set of provisions that targeted these dimensions to stimulate excellence in the Romanian higher education system. This paper critically analyses the main steps of the Romanian higher education reform as compared to other countries in the area and provides insights for further changes and developments.

Keywords: change, reform, higher-education, legislation.

1. Introduction

Since 1990 to present, higher education in Romania has experienced dramatic changes following economic and political transformations after the communist regime. Reforms had been implemented continuously in the Romanian educational system during the period following the anti-communist revolution of December 1989. Each of the more than 20 ministers who floated at the Ministry of Education wanted to operate fundamental changes in the system, considering that something essential should still be replaced or improved [1]. High priority has been given to increasing access to public higher education [2]. Universities found themselves at a crossroad. Fifty years of limited access to pedagogical information and theoretical evolution, as well as severe brain drain, have left them in a state of intellectual shock [3]. However, the educational reforms, which were supposed to change ideas, had the slowest rate of evolution [4].

At the European level, the bases of reform in the educational area were put in Lisbon, through the adoption of the Bologna Statement (19th of July 1999), signed by the ministers of education from 29 states, including Romania [6]. European universities have come under reform pressures to make them instruments of social and economic development, compromising their earlier status as socially buffered institutions [7].

Nevertheless, Romania's case is not similar, but aligns itself with the regional trend of countries that experienced times of transition. For instance, the Polish system of higher education was subjected to central planning in most aspects of its functioning, but when the country regained its independence, the universities gained extensive autonomy and returned to a model of academic self-rule [6]. Additionally, in our neighbouring country, Hungary, after 1989 the key characteristic in higher education was the tremendous increase in enrolment [8].

2. Literature review

Literature identified that higher education institutions in countries undergoing post-communist transition had to adopt more democratic governance and management frameworks. Additionally, they should adapt their curricula to reflect the shift from socialism to market economies, expand their goal beyond teaching to include research, and compete with a growing number of private higher education institutions of various types [9].

However, there are voices that acknowledge the fact that this époque, the post-communist transition, represents a unique historical construct that determined a very slow process of change due



to substantial inertial pressures and a government's chronic ignorance of change dynamics [11].

We can notice a certain lag between Romania and Bulgaria and the rest of the Central European countries in terms of higher education history. If the first Romanian and Bulgarian universities appeared only in the second half of the 19th century, the first European university was founded in the 11th century, and the wide majority of universities in Central Europe appeared in the 14th century [20]. If we look at the data corresponding to the current situation, we can notice that all of the analyzed countries signed at the same time the Bologna declaration, hence the similar structure of the higher education system [18].

According to the mass media, there have been more than 60 amendments and changes to the legislation on education in the last 25 years in Romania. After 1989, there were more than 20 ministers and each of them tried to introduce new aspects or change others.

We further present the chronology of law changes that affected the Romanian higher education's route.

Table 2
The chronology of changes in the Romanian education

Year	Law's number	The change the law brought
1990	35/1990	The law 35/1990 gave non-governmental entities the opportunity to provide educational services. Beginning with 1990, new legal initiatives liberalized and democratized the higher education system through changes and amendments to the former communist legislation. The growth of private universities system showed the need for reform.
1993 & 1999	88/1993; 144/1999	The legislative foundation for accreditation of higher education institutions was established by Law 88/1993, as revised by Law 144/1999. It also established the process for recognizing certificates, as well as the National Council on Academic Evaluation and Accreditation (CNEAA), which later became the Agency for Quality Assurance in Romania (ARACIS), which established national accreditation criteria for higher education providers.
1995	84/1995	The Law 84/1995 set up the university autonomy, previously introduced by the Romania's constitutional acts. The law defines that higher education institutions have the authority to create and implement their own development policies. However, universities' authority was nonetheless limited in some key areas (such as human resources and financial policies).
1999	-	The new public financing method for higher education was established, which was based on block grants and bilateral contracts between the Ministry of Education and HEIs (calculated using a cost-differentiated per student capita formula).
2004	288/2004	Following Romania's signing of the Bologna Declaration in 1999, Law 288/2004 made the ECTS and the diploma supplement essential elements for all universities.
2006	87/2006	One of Romania's major successes in higher education is the Law 87/2006 on educational quality assurance. It calls for the Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ARACIS) to be established as an independent public agency with accreditation, quality review, and quality assurance competencies.
2011	1/2011	The new Education Law, law no 1/2011, was highly influenced by the adoption of the National Pact for Education, endorsed by all political parties, giving strong reasons for change: the need for curricular reform, the low level of scientific production, the lack of diversification of universities, the low level of university autonomy, the miss functions in the university management and leadership, the need for a more student centered approach, the low access of rural and disadvantaged groups to higher education system, the low position of the Romanian universities in the international rankings, etc. On the 5 th of January 2011, the new National Education Law was passed, which includes a set of provisions aimed at these dimensions in order to promote excellence in Romania's higher education system.

Source: author's contribution after [16]

As it is outlined in Table 2, this constant changing landscape of the Romanian higher education system, brought in an obvious way, changes for the students, teachers and for the society as whole. First of all, since 1990, the number of higher education institutions (HEIs) and higher education participation rates have increased 2.5 times, from 48 in 1990 to 141 in 2000. New public universities have been established, especially in more disadvantaged regions, as well as private institutions [10]. Another major aspect to be considered is that of the study programs. There was an increase and a diversification in the specialized study programs offered by different institutions. In addition, there was



a major shift in the distribution of enrollment among the study fields. In some engineering and technical fields, there was competition for less than 10 percent of the available places [15]. Meanwhile, enrollments in economics, social sciences, and the humanities have grown impressively. New courses have been introduced in fields such as journalism, social work, and business, while studies in sociology, psychology, and other social science disciplines totally ignored during the communist period have been brought back to life [12].

Following the Bologna statement, higher education degree programs have been divided into three cycles since 2005: bachelor degree as the first cycle, master degree as the second stage, and the third cycle, the PhD or Doctorate, as stipulated by Law 288/2004. In addition, the ECTS and the diploma supplement have been made mandatory for all universities [19].

These two major events, the implementation of the Bologna system and, in 2007, the accession of Romania to EU created the framework for the Romanian students to become eligible for the Erasmus study programs. The European Commission estimates that a number of about 35,000 Romanian students benefitted from this opportunity between 2007 and 2014 [16].

3. Analysis and discussions

Before 1989, the higher education system was closed and entirely controlled by the state. The education law of 1977 relating to teaching staff gives the Ministry of Education broad powers over the universities, including the control of their curricula, appointment of administrative and academic staff, promotions and conditions of employment, the level and distribution of student intake [13], [14].

As it can be noticed in Table 1, both the number of higher education institutions and the number of students have increased in the following years after 1989. The proliferation of universities, mostly private, in Romania was rather disorganized, quantitative but not qualitative, due to a lack of adequate legislation [8].

Table 1
The public and private higher education enrollment by level and kind of study

Fields of education	89 / 90	90 / 91	91 / 92	92 / 93	93 / 94	94 / 95	95 / 96	96 / 97	97 / 98	98 / 99	99 / 00	00 / 01
Public education												
No. of institutions	44	48	56	62	63	63	59	58	59	57	57	57
Enrolment level	164,507	192,810	215,226	235,669	250,087	255,162	250,836	261,055	249,875	277,666	310,285	321,458
Private education												
No. of institutions	-	-	-	-	-	-	36	44	49 / 83	58 / 84	83	84
Enrolment level	-	-	-	-	-	-	85,305	93,434	110,715	130,054	130,000	139,339

Source: [17]

However, in the period 2008-2018, the number of students enrolled in undergraduate higher education decreased significantly. Several factors contributed to the decrease in the number of students enrolled from one year to the next: a lower number of high school graduates passing the baccalaureate exam; fewer people choosing to pursue multiple university degrees at the same time (unlike previous years); and a demographic decrease in the population at this level of education (19-23 years).

Useful information could be found from the analysis of the correlation matrix between several education indicators at Romanian level, between 2008-2018. The indicators are: students' expenses (euro), percentage of GDP allocated per student, the number of university graduates per thousand of people and the students to professors ratio. The correlation matrix formula is given by the formula:

$$(\rho)_{ij} = \begin{pmatrix} 1 & \frac{E[(X1 - \mu1)(X2 - \mu2)]}{\sigma(X1)\sigma(X2)} & \frac{E[(X1 - \mu1)(X3 - \mu3)]}{\sigma(X1)\sigma(X3)} & \frac{E[(X1 - \mu1)(X4 - \mu4)]}{\sigma(X1)\sigma(X4)} \\ \frac{E[(X2 - \mu2)(X1 - \mu1)]}{\sigma(X2)\sigma(X1)} & 1 & \frac{E[(X2 - \mu2)(X3 - \mu3)]}{\sigma(X2)\sigma(X4)} & \frac{E[(X2 - \mu2)(X4 - \mu4)]}{\sigma(X2)\sigma(X4)} \\ \frac{E[(X3 - \mu3)(X1 - \mu1)]}{\sigma(X1)\sigma(X2)} & \frac{E[(X3 - \mu3)(X2 - \mu2)]}{\sigma(X2)\sigma(X1)} & 1 & \frac{E[(X3 - \mu3)(X4 - \mu4)]}{\sigma(X1)\sigma(X2)} \\ \frac{E[(X4 - \mu4)(X1 - \mu1)]}{\sigma(X1)\sigma(X2)} & \frac{E[(X4 - \mu4)(X2 - \mu2)]}{\sigma(X2)\sigma(X1)} & \frac{E[(X4 - \mu4)(X3 - \mu3)]}{\sigma(X1)\sigma(X2)} & 1 \end{pmatrix}$$

where,



- X_i = indicator
- μ_1 = expected mean of the indicator
- $E[.]$ expected mean of the argument
- $-1 \leq i, j \leq 1$

The values on the diagonal of the matrix represent the correlation between the indicator and itself and is equal to 1, while each off-diagonal elements are between -1 and +1. The correlation matrix shows us the level of the correlation between the indicators, the direction and strength.

The values of the correlation matrix could be seen below.

Figure 1. Main Correlations

		Students' Expenses	GDP_percentage allocated per student	Number_of_ graduates	Students_professors_ratio
Expenses	Pearson Correlation	1	.531	.485	.798**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.041	.006	.010
	N	11	11	11	11
GDP_percentage_allocated per student	Pearson Correlation	.631	1	.929**	.741
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.041		.000	.017
	N	11	11	11	11
Number_of_graduates	Pearson Correlation	.685	.929**	1	.764
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.026	.000		.006
	N	11	11	11	11
Students_professors_ratio	Pearson Correlation	.798**	.641	.764	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.010	.017	.019	
	N	11	11	11	11

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

From the figure above we could see that there are strong correlations between the indicators. Thus, we could conclude that there are high correlations between students' expenses, percentage of GDP allocated per student, the number of university graduates per thousand of people and the students to professors ratio. Moreover, in all cases the correlations are significant at 0.01 or 0.05 level of significance.

4. Conclusions

As it can be noticed from the above-presented information, the situation of the Romanian higher education system is far from being put on a straight road. Even though changes have been made, there is still room for coherent strategies, people with vision, willingness to make a difference, and probably above all, patience. Nothing good has been built up over night. A new law is desperately needed to break down the walls of the closed system and foster academic leadership [11].

The higher education's development will be negatively affected if further restrictions on university's autonomy will exist [21]. According to the European Commission's Joint Report, there is a "quite poor absorption of young teachers and a lack of recruitment flexibility".

Curricular reforms were highly constrained by government control of academic programs, which prevented institutions from identifying a mission to match their potential.

There is still an inconsistency between the spectacular increase in the number of students and the labor market requirements. The absorption level in the labor market should become criteria for university performance and for financing.

Looking at the evolution of the Romanian higher education, it is obvious that a number of initiatives were started, however, the reform of Romanian higher education lacks a coherent legislative framework, built on a clear strategy related to the mission, the purpose, and the objectives of the educational system. Various normative papers have been created with contradictory stipulations, which, in spite of the good intention, led to confusion and incoherent application, with a negative



impact on teaching quality [5].

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