
POST 1989 HIGHER EDUCATION IN ROMANIA: TRANSITION, REFORM OR BUILDING THE COMMON?

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When World War II ended and the Communist Party came to power in Romania, the universities were affected alongside other institutions and fields of life. “Academic culture in “eastern socialism” bore the telltale print of a closed society” (Marga, 1994). Marxist-Leninist ideology was not compatible with the university, which acted as an objective defender of liberty and reason. The universities lost their autonomy and the highly centralised state would make all the decisions in what the universities were concerned, starting from the curriculum (new mandatory subjects such as political economy or scientific socialism had to be studied now by all the students, regardless of their majors), through staff appointments (often made on the basis of the political pro-communist activity of the appointee and not based on competence in the subject s/he was supposed to teach) and all the way to student selection (the students that did not have a healthy background had real difficulties in securing a place at the university) or university mergers. In fact, in the late '50s Ceaușescu, the dictator-to-be, personally attended and gave directions for the merger of the two universities of Cluj, namely Babeș University (which taught in Romanian) and Bolyai University (which taught in Hungarian)¹. The result of the merger was Babeș-Bolyai University.

Universities under communist rule became a place for propaganda; they trained the students strictly in the professions that the state needed (as a matter of fact the number of students enrolled in universities decreased and many majors were cancelled); they were under the direct rule of the state; teaching and the research were completely separated, and research was restricted to “agreed fields” as there were a lot of taboo topics.

Philosophy as the overarching discipline in the pre World War II world was replaced completely, first by the Marxist-Leninist disciplines and later by History

¹ The way the communists phrased it, this merger was just a natural response to the initiatives coming from the Hungarian and Romanian youth. In fact, the political background was much more complicated. For further details see Bottoni, *Transilvania Rossa*, 2007

(as a result of an increasing nationalism as well as a concern with the “destiny of the nation” (Marga, 1994).

Once the communist regime was overthrown in 1989, the Romanian universities were faced with an unexpected situation. Firstly, for the first months of 1990 they had to function in a legislative void. Many of the laws passed by the communists were abolished and it took some time to adopt new, so called “democratic” laws.

Brătianu (2008) points out that the complex changes that society went through as a result of the overthrow of communism challenged the universities to transform themselves as well. Thus the entire higher education system from Romania embarked on a very complex process of transformation.

Most often this process was called a process of transition. However, one could easily question the appropriateness of the term used. A transition process implies a change from a state A to a state B, or from a place A to a place B. Nevertheless, the greater majority of the Romanian universities embarked upon this transition process without defining what they meant by B, i.e. without clearly knowing what they wanted to attain.

The communist heritage meant that the starting point for all the changes (not to venture to call them reforms) was a production system based on the command-and-control economy, with virtually no exposure to a competitive business environment. Moreover, the management process and the administration used to be controlled directly by the single party’s authority, and thus every and any decision had been dependant on the political ideology and the political leaders. The education system had been overcentralised and *all* important decisions were made at the ministry level. University management had a purely administrative nature and academic leadership did not exist at all. A mechanical existence and total obedience were the main characteristics of the starting point for the change process at the beginning of 1990. (Brătianu 2008)

The wider context of Eastern Europe provided some potential paths to follow. One could have been to respond to the challenges of the region, namely to

“change their governance and management structures to more democratic ones that would allow more autonomous behaviour; change their curricula to match the transformation from socialist economies to market economies; change their mission from mainly teaching oriented to incorporate research; and compete with a new sector of private higher education institutions of varying kinds” (Westerheijden and Sorensen, 1999, pp.13-14).

As mentioned before, a transition process implies a change from a state A to a state B, and while it was common knowledge what state A represented, no one knew for sure what the aimed-for state B was nor when it was going to be attained. Empirical observations have suggested that the most commonly mentioned phrases in connection with the final stage of transition have been “capitalism” and “market economy”, but given the lack of a clear definition, these terms are also “fuzzy” at best.

A number of universities (especially the comprehensive ones) have set about trying to regain their pre-World War II status, by making many changes towards accommodating many characteristics of the Humboldtian model made famous by the University of Berlin. The most obvious change consisted of the return of research in the universities and the freedom of teaching and research (as there were no longer taboo subjects or topics).

The former pressure that censorship had put on the higher education institutions was replaced by different kinds of pressure, coming from various groups of stakeholders that could now express their requests and concerns freely. The most vocal were, naturally, the students.

But there were also alternative paths to be followed. Some universities set about aiming for status (taking Oxford, Stanford or Harvard as role-models), some started by updating their curricula to join the most recent international debates in their respective fields, while others (especially private initiatives) set about making money. Up until 1989, the Romanian higher education system consisted solely of state institutions, but starting from 1990 onwards quite a number of private institutions were set up.

However, when Burton R. Clark's books were published in Romania in the early 1990s they made history, and most of the universities embraced almost immediately the entrepreneurial model as part of their reform process. This meant diversified sources of funding, and not relying solely on the funds coming from the state. Unfortunately, despite all the enthusiasm at the declarative level, even today the bulk of the funds for state universities comes from the state (around 60%).

Following the model of the American universities, the Romanian ones also moved towards massification of higher education, as well as towards its marketisation. Burton R. Clark is often cited or the idea of the entrepreneurial university is mentioned in most of the discussions about the direction in which the universities should head.

In the last decade, the enthusiasm for the entrepreneurial model is somehow tempered by the reforms required by the Bologna process, which are currently under way, and also required by law.

One could argue that the enthusiasm for reforms was not mirrored at all in the actual reforms being implemented. Marga (2003) diagnosed the system as follows:

- “it transmits knowledge, but does not encourage creativity;
- it is mostly repetitive;
- it is based on the separation into rigid subjects, while there is no real inter-disciplinarity;
- it is an equalitarian system of a collectivist type where individual performance is not really recognised;
- it is centralised, since for any decision the approval of the Ministry is required;
- it stresses general qualification at graduate level with less attention paid to postgraduate studies;
- it functions under the pressure of corruption (concerning grading, competitions, job offers, examinations, etc) when competition, transparency, accountability are really needed;”

At this point of the discussion a brief look at some numbers concerning the Romanian Higher Education system should be useful. In 2002 there were fifty-six public higher education institutions and twenty accredited private ones, which together had over half a million students enrolled. The number of students increased to almost one million in the academic year 2006-2007². According to the National Statistical Yearbook in 2006 there were 107 higher education institutions, of which fifty-six were public and fifty-one private. While the number of public institutions remained constant, the number of the private ones more than doubled in less than half a decade. Also in the academic year 2005-2006 there were 716,464 students enrolled in higher education institutions, which represented around 35% of the 19-23 age cohort. Of these, about 2,500 students were taking part every year in Erasmus programmes. The education sector is allocated about 4% of the GDP, although for almost two years now there is a public document signed by all the stakeholders in education stating that education should be given yearly at least 6% of the GDP.

² This can also be considered a result not only of a higher degree of enrolment in higher education of high school graduates, but also to the increasing of the age cohort as a result of a communist decree that outlawed abortion.

In 1998, the Minister of Education at the time, Andrei Marga, signed the Bologna Declaration on behalf of Romania. He pointed out (Marga, 2008) the options available for the Romanian higher education system at that point, namely

- the reform process should be completed even if it takes place in a problematic context, i.e. education reforms cannot wait for economical revival and they must be applied as soon as possible.
- The reform process should also be a comprehensive one. Marga distinguishes three stages of the reform process, namely the recuperation reform (recovery of what had been lost during communist times), the synchronisation reform (i.e. the reform that would allow Romanian universities to compete with similar universities from the region or even continent) and the reform process that tackles the issue of globalisation, in which any university has to compete on a global level with the best universities in the world and with the latest scientific discoveries and innovations. A superficial reform, one that remains only at declarative level, would only lengthen the period of agony of the system. Even today, many voices argue that the reform process has not been completed in full and that there is still need for fundamental reforms.
- Reform should also be accompanied by a European concept of the education reform, i.e. the reform should be compatible with other change processes taking place at European as well as regional and global levels. An “original” reform that would ignore any other processes taking place simultaneously would not yield the best outcomes. For example, the university reform of 1998 was structured along six chapters: curriculum reform; abandoning the reproductive in favour of the problem-solving-based education; an innovative interaction of the university with the economic and administrative environment, decentralisation; a new university management; and advanced reforms of internal cooperation.

According to Brătianu (1998), at the beginning of the present decade the Romanian system of higher education faced three major challenges, namely the adaptation to a new market economy, with not only national actors, but rather European and even global actors; integration in the European Higher Education Area through the Bologna process and upgrading of their leadership and management to the “knowledge society”.

Throughout the entire two last decades, the Romanian universities were faced with many issues and challenges. We shall briefly discuss the most important of them.

The comprehensive universities that, among others, aimed for status, joined similar universities in national consortia. Furthermore, they clarified and followed their mission statements and their vision and leadership. A new success model was being created for the Romanian university, one that would allow the individual universities to reach international prestige. Some universities are given as examples for the brilliant way they adapted to their regional context; to mention just two of them, Babeş-Bolyai University adopted the policy of multiculturalism which answered successfully the learning needs of the ethnically varied population from Transylvania, including Romanians, Hungarians, Germans and Jewish people. Babeş-Bolyai University is also frequently quoted as an example of ecumenism, as it houses no fewer than four different faculties of theology (Orthodox, Greek-Catholic, Catholic and Reformed). Iuliu Hațieganu University of Medicine and Pharmacy implemented teaching in English and French for a number of degrees it offered, answering the needs expressed by foreign students to study full courses in English and in French.

All the success stories of the universities included, among other things, strategic management, quality assurance processes, mobility of staff and students, international cooperation programmes, a multitude of interactions with society and last but not least institutional reconstruction.

In the last few months, a debate has also been started related to the implicit values of education, and higher education especially. The results of the debate are most likely going to make a noticeable difference in the field, helping to speed along the process of classification and eventually ranking of the Romanian universities.

Other current issues are connected with money, participation in higher education, the public versus the private sector, internationalisation, governance, etc.

Money is most often mentioned in debates over autonomy versus accountability, as universities would strive for as much autonomy as possible while trying to minimise their accountability towards the Ministry as main provider of funds and other stakeholders from society at large (from students all the way to employers). Entrepreneurialism, as mentioned above, has also played an important part in the universities' strategies of diversifying their sources of funding. Against the same background related to money, the question of the cost of study has also been often

raised. The debate is still open as to whether tax-paying students should cover in full the cost of their study or whether the university (and/or other actors) contribute towards some of these costs.

Where participation is concerned, the rate of high school students that go on to university is fairly high; nevertheless, there is still quite a gap between the students that leave secondary education and those who go on to higher education. However, the Romanian higher education system now faces a different problem. In communist times, Ceaușescu passed a decree that outlawed abortion. As a result, the rate of birth was very high. For instance, the number of children in the 0 to 4 age group in 1980 was 1,998,000, almost 2 million. When communism was overturned, the first decree to be abolished was the one banning abortion. As a direct consequence, the number of births decreased enormously. In 1997 the number of children in the 0 to 4 age group was only 1,191,000, a bit more than half what it had been seventeen years before. This has as a direct consequence a decrease in the demand for school places, even on purely demographic grounds.

Universities reacted to this by diversifying the degrees offered, by adopting massification strategies and by trying to teach degrees that offer general skills rather than overspecific ones. Until 2007 the system benefited from a constantly increasing number of students participating in tertiary education. Starting with 2007, the demographic gap started being noticed, as the age cohort numbers began decreasing dramatically. However, the large number of students recorded up to 2007 should also be considered within the broader context of issues such as “double-degree-ing”, degree polishing and “tyranny of numbers”. By “double degree-ing” we aim to describe a common practice among Romanian youth, namely studying for two separate BAs at the same time. Thus the system most often is likely to consider one student as two, a phenomenon that is going to be more accurately measured in a couple of years once the National Enrolment Student Registry is implemented. A number of articles in specialised journals have also referred to the “degree polishing” strategies of Romanian students. As there is a difference in the perception of private and public universities, many students tend to get a BA degree from a private institution and then try and “polish” it by completing an MA degree at a public institution. Last but not least, the “tyranny of numbers” has to be considered as a very important pressure factor in the higher education system. More specifically, because of the increase in the number of people that have completed tertiary education, many jobs that twenty

years ago required only high-school studies now demand a university diploma. Thus today you need to have at least a BA in order to get the same job your parents got with a Baccalaureate diploma.. Massification in higher education has also led to isolated extreme cases in the system, such as false diplomas and higher education institutions that in exchange for a sum of money would issue an officially recognised diploma. Corruption is still an important problem of the system, and quality assurance rules are yet to be fully adopted by all universities and strictly enforced by the Romanian authorities.

The relationship between the public and private higher education institutions has many a time been described as “symbiotic”. Nevertheless, many consider it to be posing risks for student and research activities in terms of quality. In order to prevent any kind of problems, it is our belief that the sector should be better organised through specific legislation.

Many universities also embarked upon the process of internationalisation. They started joining the Erasmus programme and implementing the ECTS system, the first steps towards the Bologna process. Moreover, a number of universities were also actively involved in international structures (such as the EUA, the GUNI network, the Salzburg seminar, international research networks, etc). Also partly due to internationalisation processes new “fashionable” degrees started being developed, such as forensic science or environmental studies. Romanian universities were constantly looking west, trying to import and adapt good practices but also complaining of the lack of resources in comparison to some American universities, for instance. But then, this kind of discourse is a common trait of all European universities that barely compare in terms of their assets with the very rich American universities. Internationalisation also brought about individually set objective such as reaching a certain position in internationally relevant rankings (e.g. reaching top 500 in the Shanghai ranking).

Even though during the last couple of hundred of years Romanian universities have looked towards the West and tried to adopt and adapt the best model there was, one should keep in mind the specificities of the Romanian culture and societies, which made the adoption of certain models more successful at a certain time than others. Nevertheless, any model adopted had to be adapted to the Romanian realities, and there could never be a model completely imported and applied as such, i.e. in the way it worked in the country in which it was first set up.

The governance system is one of the most highly debated aspects of higher education. There are essentially three models (Hüfner, 1995) in existence: the state-control model; the state supervising model and the market-based model. It goes without saying that the lines between these models are never clear cut and most often can be blurred.

The state controlled model is rather similar to the Napoleonic type of university, namely where the state regulated almost everything concerning the university, from access conditions to curriculum and degree requirements (van Vught, 1994), seeing the universities as an instrument for delivering government priorities. Nevertheless, the academic community often retains considerable authority and independence in the day-to-day running of internal affairs.

The state supervisory model is a weaker form in which the state expresses its authority. It implies that individual universities have more power in making their own decisions, though the government retains its overseeing role of the system, “steering at a distance” (Huffner, 1995).

The market-based model requires no role on the part of government. Higher education institutions make all decisions individually on the basis of the demands of the market.

Table 1: Sadlak³ (1995) synthesises the situation in Romania

	PRE-COMMUNIST Implicit and self-regulatory	COMMUNIST: Centrally-regulated	POST-COMMUNIST: Explicit and self-regulatory
Main traits	Confidence in values, in particular academic freedom	Aims, tasks, and resources in teaching and research defined by the Communist Party and allocated by the State	Competition for students, funding: importance of institutional and programme academic standing; multiple forms of self-representation; adherence to academic freedom.
System-wide regulation	Minimal	Compulsory and detailed party/state regulation	Preferably within a broad State regulatory role
Planning/system approach	None or very limited	Comprehensive: an instrument of political control	Particularly important at institutional level

³ Sadlak's conceptualisation includes the entire region of Central and Eastern Europe, but is fully applicable to Romania as well. The framework is especially important in that it highlights the general characteristics of higher education in the region, relevant to the role and significance of governance and strategic management in the present, post-communist, and post-conflict periods.

Accountability	Yes, but its parameters were differently defined than nowadays	Hardly any or at the discretion of the political authorities	Determined by the degree of accountability to specific constituencies
Incentives	Reliance on intrinsic motivation in learning and research	Achievement of goals set by the party and the state	Well-being of the institution and of its principal constituency
Financing and budget	Heavily tuition-fee dependant/input-oriented line-item budgeting	Totally state-dependant but relatively "worry-free"; rigid line-item budgeting	Multiple sources and instruments of financing and budgeting
Relation to Labour market	Minimal and only indirect	Close co-ordination with state-set manpower planning	Significant but indirect; a result of interaction of multiple constituencies
Internal governance and structure	Federation of relatively independent sub-units (Chairs)	Externally determined and politically controlled	Concentration of administrative power/ Diversity of structure
Strategic planning	Occasionally at sub-unit level, not essential for governance	Almost none at institutional and sub-unit level	Essential for survival and well-being of the institution. Important approach in governance.

Source: Sadlak, 1995

It is our opinion that the third column presented above is accurate only for the period between 1990 and 2005, when Romania finally passed legislation implementing the Bologna process at national level. The implementation of the Bologna process is bound to cause more changes than before to the Romanian higher education system

Scott (2000) also suggested a number of the main characteristics connected to reconstructing the system of higher education in South-Eastern Europe, characteristics that are fully valid for the situation in Romania as well.

- "Reconstruction consists of changes on a scale and at speed never attempted in other parts of Europe. New policies are being developed and implemented in a very short period.
- In some places, reconstruction has to be total: the legal framework in which universities operate, as well as their mission and articulation within wider systems, has to be reconsidered.
- The diversity across the region is immense and therefore no standard solutions can be applied. For example, in some places it is necessary to strengthen the university at the expense of their faculties or other constituent parts, while in other places, decentralisation of the decision-making process is necessary.
- Staffing is a major issue. The level and appropriateness of skills and qualifications and the mechanisms for renewing the staffing base are central concerns for the most universities and higher education systems.

- The chronic under-financing of higher education is of utmost importance, Universities have passed through the transition period facing fierce financial constraints.
- The academic and the administrative management of universities are not separated. Most of the university managers are elected, and sometimes huge collective bodies (Senates, Academic Councils, etc) are involved in making decisions. This situation contributes to a largely unclear distinction between executive decisions and policy-making.
- The HE systems now face new challenges including the development of a significant private sector (which looks to be more dynamic and flexible) and the increasing role of research in universities. In some countries, this process was accompanied by the integration of the institutes managed separately by the Academies of Science. This, therefore, is the background against which planning and management of higher education must operate.”

Despite all the problems the system faces, it still has to own up to the challenges raised by international actors in the field. In 2003, the OECD made the following recommendations regarding the higher education system: it should strive for better management, it should focus on core skills rather than excessive specialisation (as there are too many specialisations), a balance between public and private institutions should be reached, accountability should be increased; and last but not least, data collection should be improved.

Further changes in the system are imminent, as the new law of education still awaits either implementation or amendment by the next government. What the future reserves for the Romanian universities is still to be seen.

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