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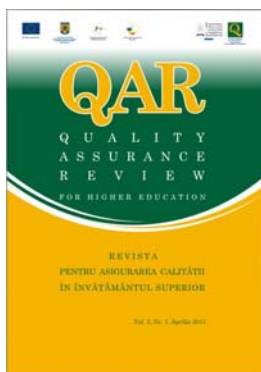
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Major Changes of a Higher Education System in a Transition Country. Romania as a Case Study

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Major Changes of a Higher Education System in a Transition Country. Romania as a Case Study

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Rezumat: În studiul de față, autorii încearcă să definească tipurile de schimbări majore ale sistemului de învățământ superior, având ca punct de plecare studiul de caz al unei țări a cărei tranziție a fost prea lungă și non-liniară: România. Aceste schimbări acoperă structura spațială, calitatea învățământului superior și interacțiunea instituțiilor de învățământ cu mediul acestora. Configurația spațială a sistemului de învățământ a cunoscut schimbări importante: a) sub presiunea cererii, în etapa imediat următoare anului 1989, s-a multiplicat numărul de universități de stat și a explodat numărul de instituții particulare de învățământ superior; b) procesul de autorizare provizorie, coroborat cu măsurile luate de către ministerul de profil a diminuat numărul instituțiilor particulare și a programelor de studii în instituțiile publice; c) acreditarea unui număr exagerat de instituții particulare de învățământ superior a scăzut responsabilitatea socială a acestora.

Cuvinte cheie: dinamica calității, învățământ superior, schimbări spațiale, tranziție, relații universitate- mediu

Abstract: In the present study, the authors seek to define major types of change in the higher education system, having as a starting point a case study of a country whose transition has been too long and non-linear: Romania. These changes cover the spatial structure, higher education quality and the interaction of the education institutions with their environment. The spatial configuration of the education system has undergone significant changes: a) under the pressure of demand, in the period following 1989, the number of state universities has multiplied and the number of private universities has exploded; b) the provisional approval process in conjunction with the measures taken by the Ministry of Education has diminished the number of private institutions and the number of study programs of the public institutions; c) the accreditation of an exaggerated number of private higher education institutions has decreased their social responsibility.

Key words: dynamic of the quality, higher education, spatial changes, transition, university - environment relationships

1. Introduction

In the past 20 years a rich literature was shaped, literature covering the changes that have taken place in the education systems of transitional countries from centralized economy to market economy. Given the importance of the Bologna Declaration in coordinating reforms in higher education, we can distinguish two major intervals. The first prior to 2000, when the studies are focused either on comparative analysis of education systems in transition states or on the changes in the respective states, and the second after this year, with the same structure.

Therefore, it is noteworthy that a significant proportion of studies conducted in the last decade of the past century were focused on the analysis of diversity of higher education systems in countries in transition, trying to capture the unique and comparative dynamics of the changes in relation to mutations occurring in politics and socio - economical development of those countries (Cerych 1995; Huffner, 1995; Sadlak, 1995; Laporte and Ringold, 1997; Jablonska-Skinder and Sadlak, 1997; Frydman et al., 1999). Other studies were focused on sequential analyses of higher education systems of different countries (Mihailescu et al., 1994; Koutsky, 1996; Derenyi, 1997; Reisz, 1997; Hrubos, 2000).

“The Bologna moment” can be considered a turning point in higher education reform across Europe, but especially for the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. The states in transition were so little reluctant to the proposed system that did not hesitate to implement it relatively quickly, despite the fact that the perverse effects could not be anticipated. This point is reflected more or less evidently in numerous studies that can be noted in the specialised literature over the entire area of Central and Eastern Europe (Kwiek, 2001; Mesman and Barrows, 2001; Neave, 2001; Jozwiak, 2002; Zaharia, 2002; Rozsnayi, 2003; Korka et al., 2007; Scott, 2009) or over states level (Thomas, 2001; Cerych, 2002; Rosenberg, 2002; Marga, 2002; Georgescu and Palade, 2003; Georgieva et al., 2003; Nicolescu, 2003; Csizmandia, 2006; Duczmal, 2006; Aber ek and Aber ek, 2010). A summary of the higher education system’s state in countries in transition can be found in the "General Report on the Current Status of Higher Education in the Black Sea Region" (2002), where it is presented the higher education of 11 countries. For some of these countries relevant radiographs before implementing the Bologna system are presented (Romania, Bulgaria, Turkey and Albania).

All these studies conducted in recent decades show difficulties universities underwent and still face as they adapt to the new type of economy, but also in the process of building the single European higher education area.

Setting out on an introductory way, from the evolution mechanism of the Romanian higher education system, we have distinguished a certain route to adaptation to an economy and society with conflicting dynamics. Both university and society in general, regarded as mainframes, have different self-structuring inertia and capabilities. Harmonizing these processes of self structuring involves time and mechanisms, including political ones. The coherence between the educational policies and the social and economical ones represent the basis of an ideal interaction between the universities and their insertion environment.

It is known that within a transition process, which involves such profound political and ideological, economic, social and cultural transformations, the correlation between the two inertial environments is not fully apparent, with unpredictable actions and behaviours, having actors with contradictory mentalities.

Knowing that the education is a field in which the content of science and the process of science learning has to be given justification (Ott, 2002), therefore we tried generalizing the major changes, which relate to the essential components of a higher education system: spatial configuration, the quality of its components and relation with the environment in which each university operates. These changes are strongly influenced by the dominant idea of today’s national politics, namely massifying the higher education.

Implementing such a policy in countries facing the hardest transition has perverse effects caused by the legal void, the inconsistency of funding, the cohabitation of different mentalities, the continuation of the elective system, by the fact that widening the universities’ authority is not

accompanied by social responsibility etc. The perverse effects of universities' participating to such a process are related to the lowering of their credibility through the poor quality of offered services diminishing their involvement in research and the lack of involvement in solving problems that local communities are facing. Obviously the benefits are linked to image and increasing the contribution to the general formal education of society.

Transition difficulties determine the fact that universities are prone to choosing the behaviours of some economic agents, guided mainly by providing operational resources and to reducing their efforts in ensuring a high quality educational process (Zaharia, 2002). At the same time, haste with which the Bologna system started to get implemented, at least for the transitional countries, raises many issues in relation to the economic and social environment. The imperfections of the system, especially in the first cycle, when the graduate must grasp both the fundamental knowledge on the field and the necessary skills for quick insertion in the labour market, reflected in extreme differences between graduates in terms of quality.

All these elements mark the main stages we can differentiate in the logic of the complex processes of adaptation of universities to companies and economies in transition. In addition, the universities, too connected to financing from one year to another, do not accomplish one of their main missions: designing the structure and characteristics over time of tomorrow's world.

2. Work hypothesis and research methods

The first hypothesis is that the process of adapting to market economy, higher education faces a profound spatial restructuring and resizing, through the physical insertion of supply in regional and sub-regional markets. Given the gap between supply and demand, inherited from the communist period, in a society based on market economy even a process to restore the balance takes place, including the decentralization of higher education.

The second hypothesis is based on the logic that a process of decentralization and sudden boom of education providers will lead to a decrease in quality of higher education, unless there are quality insurance mechanisms. In this context, full market liberalization of tertiary education providers has allowed the cohabitation of state and private universities. This cohabitation in the context of under-funding is difficult and, furthermore, generates deviations from quality in the search for financial resources.

The third hypothesis is that the revitalization of universities and retrieving the place in the value system can be made only by optimal insertion locally and regionally. After a period of about 20 years, the universities were separated from their local and regional environment, currently seeing a tendency to harmonize the curricula taking more into account the markets at these levels.

In order to confirm or invalidate these assumptions, the analyses were undertaken using data and information that, even if coming from different sources, allow uniform approach of the dynamics of higher education. On such a basis, we attempt to define changes that can validate the three hypotheses.

In the individualization of dramatic changes of higher education system during transition, as mentioned, have been used numerous statistics from the National Institute of Statistics (annual reports on higher education in Romania), Ministry of Education, from some universities, based on questionnaires sent to them. Other types of qualitative and quantitative information were provided by government decisions, minister orders, belonging to various publications and advisory councils and the profile Ministry: National Council for Funding Higher Education, National Council of Higher Education & Scientific Research Agency Quality Assurance in Higher Education.

The research method was mostly deductive and corollary, based on analyses of the interdependencies between the dynamics of social, economic and political life, on one hand, and complex changes that have taken place in the higher education system, on the other hand. To emphasize certain relationships between events we approached the statistical analyses methods, such as correlation or regression. Obviously, the systemic approach is guiding research method that allows dynamic analogies between higher education and dynamic systems in general.

The output quality of higher education depends very much on the quality of inputs, internal restructuring of university curricula and new environmental features of insertion. In addition, political decisions on EU integration and participating in building the single European Higher Education Area have an important role in implementing the Bologna process, which Romania joined without hesitation. This external intervention may be interpreted as an aggression against the national system of higher education being treated as such, with its good parts, but also the less good.

3. Results and comments

The changes bring to front the logic of spatial dynamics, of quality and inserting the universities in their socio-economical and cultural environment. Graphically, three change categories summarize rich information on the particular dynamics universities located in an environment under constant pressure. On one hand there is the nostalgia of yesteryear quality in higher education, but that was one highly selective (for example, for Geography there 20 to 25 candidates per place), and secondly the current trend of massification, which involves a number spots even greater than the number of potential candidates. In such circumstances, it makes sense to talk of a decrease in quality of graduates, overall, given the quality of entries in the system.

An important role in promoting reform is held by the application of public communication strategies by which universities ensure transparency on of the internal management, the spending of public money, but also to communicate effectively with all actors of the, from local decision makers, regional and central to businesses, institutions and NGOs with which they interact (Coman, 2003; Ryszard, 2003).

During the transition process, the public has a general feeling that centralism ensures more rigor to the education system, while excessive autonomy leads to its degradation (Reisz, 2006). Hence the difficulties of managing the whole system in which the two forces are trying to re-balance. However, the transition from a centralized to a democratic society is a process difficult to generalize, mainly due to this opposition. Nevertheless, considering the structural and temporal dynamics of the higher education system, can be distinguish at least three dramatic changes, presented as flowcharts.

3.1 Spatial changes. It is characterized by a tendency to fully cover the local demand and of fast approach to tertiary education providers to geographic areas with potential customers. In this sense we must underline the state contribution in scattering higher education institutions and in increasing schooling capacity of major universities, but also the role of private initiative in covering an impressive demand. State's contribution resulted in the emergence of 11 new universities, performed under local or regional political leaders' pressure (Figure 1). Large universities and some of the new universities, in an effort to attract as many students as possible have spread through subsidiaries, located usually in the county seat.

Simultaneously, the number of private universities which have emerged since 1990 has multiplied, reaching about 130 in 2001. Of these, 33 went into liquidation in the 2002-2003 academic year, while others have been accredited in the coming years (29).

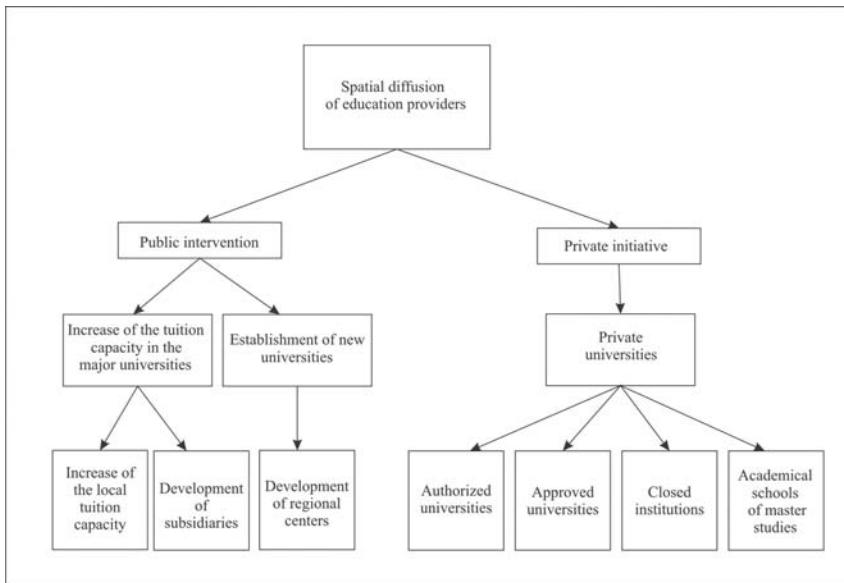
By examining the spatial configuration of the network of higher education institutions (Figure 2) we can synthesize the following:

- location of public and private universities is closely correlated with the existence of a critical mass of population, which explains why they focus on the most populated urban centers. Moreover, the correlation coefficient between the number of inhabitants of university centers and universities is significant if we include Bucharest ($r^2 = 0.91$) and excluding capital – much lower ($r^2 = 0.49$). The significance of r^2 for the correlation between the number of inhabitants of university centers (and their subsidiaries) with the number of students enrolled, meet the same differences: the value is 0.97 with Bucharest, without Bucharest it is lower, but remains significant ($r^2 = 0.72$);

- most private universities are located in towns that have state universities, because at least in provisional approval stage, they use their human resources;

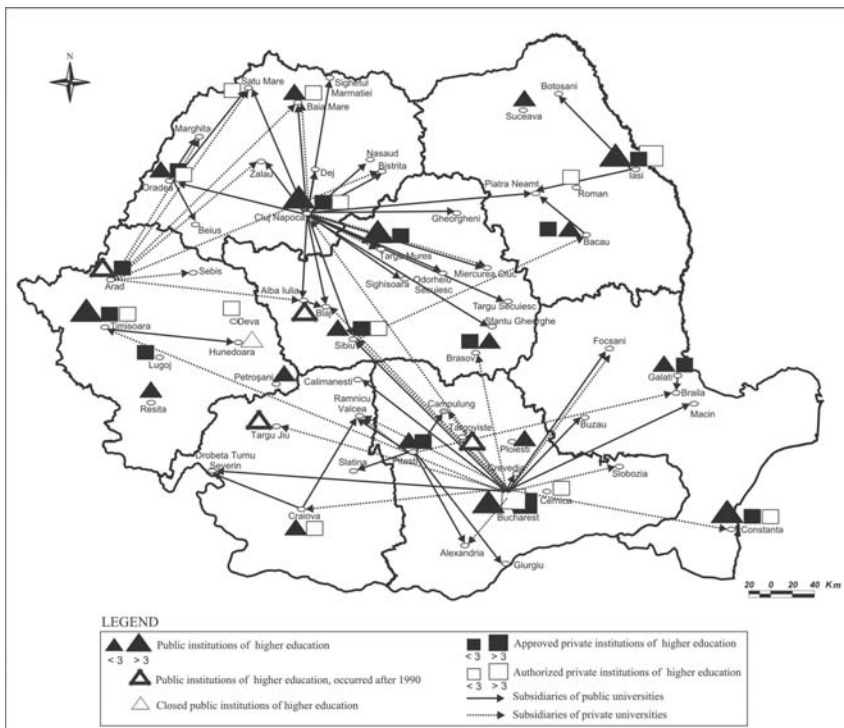
– branches of public universities are usually located in medium-sized cities, while the ones belonging to state universities, in small towns as well;

Figure 1. Tertiary education providers



- spatial distribution of universities shows hypertrophy of the capital, compared with other universities, followed by three other universities, with regional function (Iași, Cluj and Timișoara).

Figure 2. Spatial distribution of the tertiary education providers

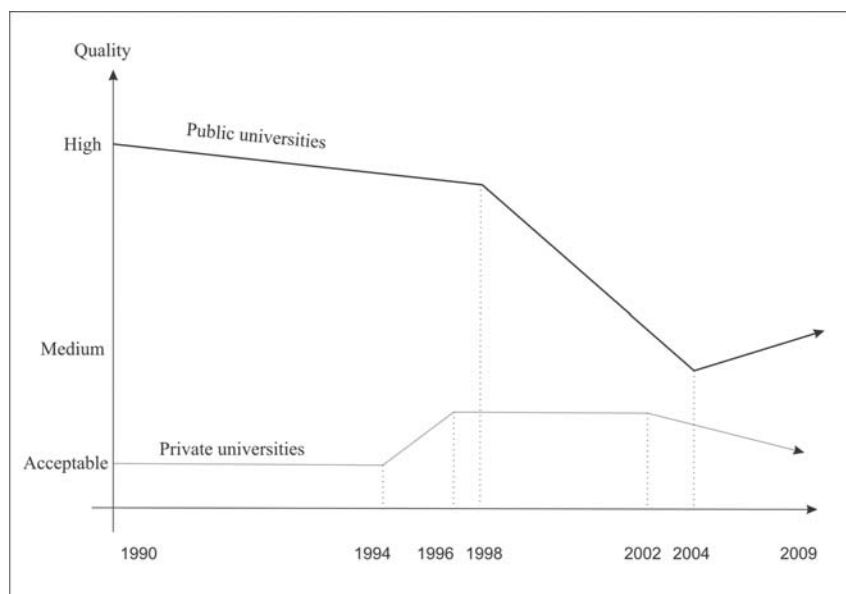


Increasing the number of students and hence the emergence of new higher education institutions inside the territory was based on the huge gap between supply and demand in the communist period (Ianoş et al., 2003-2004). The collapse of the totalitarian regime has determined increased pressure on the higher education system, which was forced to increase tuition figures under the demand pressure. Whereas public institutions, inertially, wanted to maintain the prestige won when they had fewer students, a very favourable market niche emerged for private universities. Thus, the higher education network has expanded to excessive size.

3.2 Qualitative changes. When trying to outline the change of the quality in higher education, we must take into consideration the rapid massification of this type of education so that the educational supply exceeds the demand. Overall, judged in terms of quality in general, despite the fact that bureaucracy in quality assurance has grown, the quality of higher education has decreased. The change of the current legislation could lead to a revival of Romanian higher education if it will cause major changes in funding process.

Qualitative dynamics change highlights a decrease in the quality gap between public universities and private institutions in terms of a permanent rapprochement after the enforcement of the Higher Education Act of 1995. The evolution of quality in higher education was in contradiction in public and private universities (Figure 3). Loss of quality in public universities was slow until the funding system based on number of university positions was changed to funding according to the number of students. Budgetary financial resources being limited, the law allowed state universities to charge students attending school. Since then (1998), loss of quality in public universities was emphasized that because of lack of resources enrolled for tuition fees, doubling the number of students financed from the budget. This trend reached a minimum in 2001-2002, when the ministry limited the number of students that had to pay an annual tuition fee. The transition to Bologna (LMD), seems to have had no noticeable effect on quality of education in public universities so far, since its quality measurement is dominated by performance indicators covering learning environment conditions and teaching quality.

Figure 3. The dynamics of the estimated quality of the tertiary education by state and private providers



Looking at the development of quality of education in private institutions, we can note two major breaks:

- a) was first determined by the fact that since 1993 they, as well as the state universities were forced to get provisional authorization and therefore comply with certain quality standards. The effect was that about 10 such institutions went bankrupt, as well as complying with the required standards;
- b) the second represents a double effect – the dissolution of 33 private higher education institutions, through government decision (because of very poor quality) and also the accreditation of the first 18 private universities.

In addition to these very important breaks, after 2004, throughout these categories of universities a process of degradation of the quality of education takes place because of exaggerated and apparently illegal enrolment, the students enrolled in distance learning at Spiru Haret University of Bucharest. This was schooling over 300,000 students in the academic year 2008-2009, of which 250,000 in distance education system only.

Obviously, in such a case, we must take account of changes in university curricula. In this regard, autonomy allows each institution of higher education to offer programs of study for bachelor, master's and doctoral level, authorized and approved, after being evaluated by an outside agency part of the European Registry of quality insurance agencies. Unfortunately, the current system of state education funding does not support quality (Ianoș, 2005), teachers in order to have the necessary resources for salaries, promote almost all students and like the idea of having as many students that pay a tuition fee (fees remain at the universities disposal).

The European open competition on labour market will require an increased quality of teaching and the standards properly defined, valued and respected. This process of natural selection of Romanian universities will involve major qualitative changes reflected in the level of the graduates.

Therefore, under the circumstances of the transition from a centralized education system, the effects are directly on the quality. The actor's diversification on the tertiary education market and the high demand does not lead to competition in quality, but to one of attract more financial resources for the budget of each institution. Except for some specialized universities such as medicine and architecture, which have high funding ratios, in all other institutions the quality of education has dropped dramatically.

3.3 University-environment interaction changes. Starting from the idea that any higher education institution is situated in a particular ecological site (Shills, 1988), implicitly there are types of interactions between it and its insertion environment. In a transitional period the relationship between university and socio-economic and cultural environment has experienced relatively large changes and tend to increase the involvement of higher education institutions in solving problems of society. The route of this involvement is very difficult because both environments, academic and employability have different structural dynamics. The states in this transition, know economic and social processes that change very quickly, are contradictory, impossible to be correlated with the structure of curricula. Decreasing corporate interest during the transition period to fund research programs favoured its orientation toward basic research aspects, including the separation of universities from their environment (Andrei et al., 2010). Meanwhile, training of specialists takes at least 5 years, during which time the original demand is no longer valid due to sudden opening of the market and changes that took place.

In the dynamic of interactions between university and insertion environment, throughout the transition period we can notice the following dominant types (Figure 4):

- a) chaotic interactions following the de-structuring of the relations between the university and insertion environment. These interactions were individualized in the first five years of transition. The heritage structure dominated by the preparation of technical specialists continued to be a brake on the process of covering the needs of economic, legal, educational, social and political domains. Inertia of such a structure meant to continue funding technical areas, even if Romanian industry declined dramatically and the opening of undersized funding for emerging areas. The result of this under-funding has allowed the emergence

and growth of private educational institutions that have trained 90% students for economic and legal fields. Meanwhile, the desire of the public for information has boost the development of media, and also training specialists in the field of journalism and public communication

- b) interactions dominated by the national effort to adapt to market requirements. Reducing relations between the university and local / regional level has led each of them to establish curricula in relation to the demand at the national level. Explosion of SMEs, whose number exceeded 500 thousand increases in demand for training economists and lawyers. The consequence was that all universities, including the technical ones, (even University of Petroșani, Baia Mare, Ploiești of mining, respectively oil profile) have developed curricula in economics, public administration and business management. Meanwhile, restructuring of industry in the period of 1997-2000 had powerful effects on technical education programs that have diminished the number of students or have dropped some disciplines. Development of civil society, the number of NGOs spurred programs in the fields of sociology studies, public communication and social assistance.
- c) interactions typical to gradual reconsideration of local and regional market, given the inertia of training mainly of the economic and legal specialists. After 2000 there is a revival of the Romanian economy, increasing number of economists and lawyers, as well as specialists in to the high technology areas. Inertially, the university offer exceeded the market demand for specialists in economic and legal fields, so that in 2008-2009 there are a total of 100,000 graduates and 20,000 respectively. Simultaneously, the share of students in high tech domains permanently increases, standing out is a growing market for computer science, cybernetics, computers and biotechnology. University has long functioned as an organism implanted and fueled with clients from the local and regional environment but operating alongside their needs. Mutual ignorance has created the image of rootless universities, passive to local and regional issues.

Furthermore, these communities were trying to solve problems without resorting to experts in universities, creating a real barrier, often increased by political interference. After 2000, shyly, a process of re-evaluating the relation between university and local/regional community has begun, with the emergence of industrial and technological parks and increasing complexity of problems. EU integration has involved efforts to build the base for increasing the competitiveness of local and regional economies, and in this regard, appealing to universities and their growing involvement proves all the more necessary.

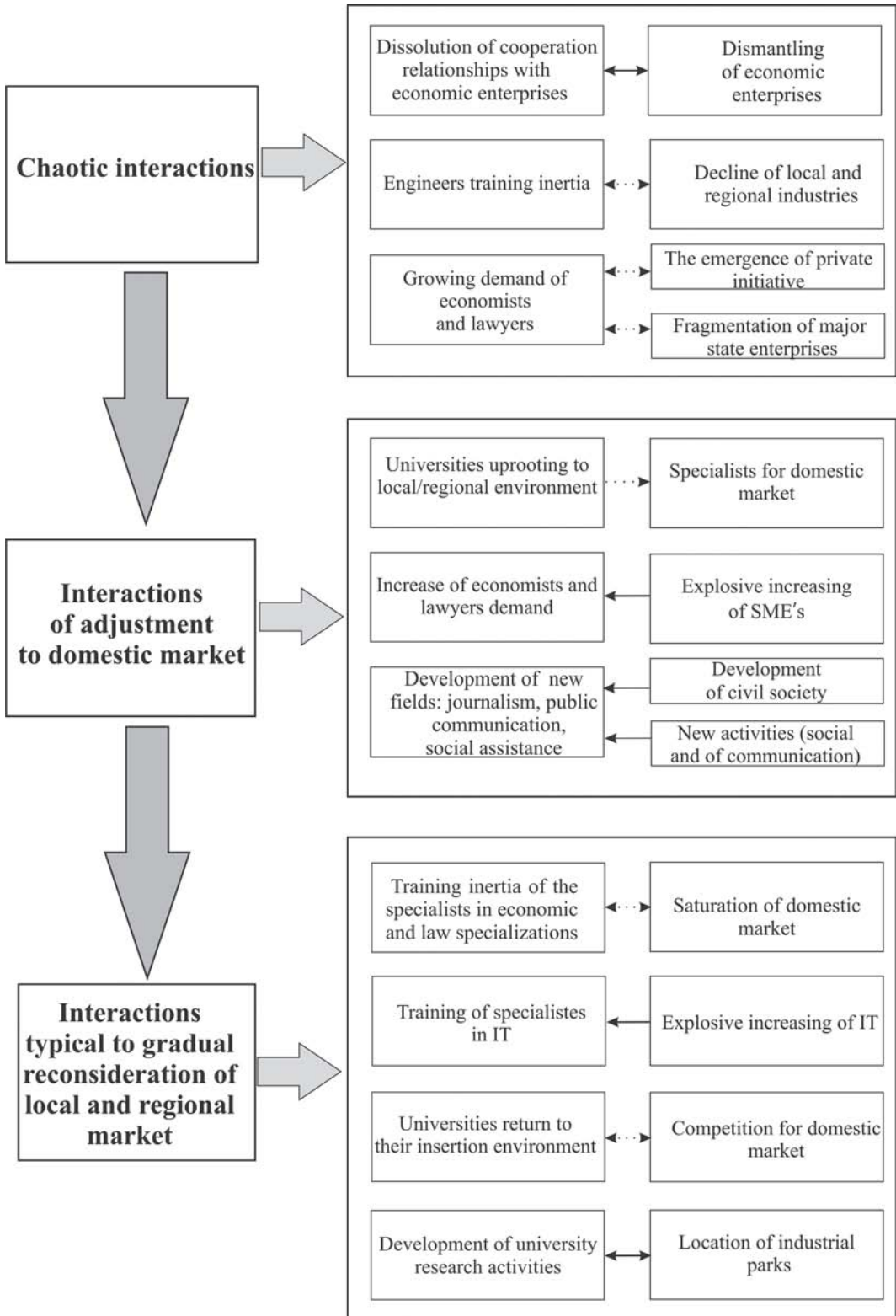
Therefore, we can generalize that in the transition from a centralized system to one typical to market economy, the relationship between higher education institutions faces initially a dismantling an accentuated neglecting, period after which it is reconsidered. The role of decision makers in the optimal economic integration of universities is essential (Nicolescu, 2003). When universities and their environments are finding that they need each other cooperation begins, and the latest trends are to attract universities to solving more complicated problems of communities.

4. Conclusions

Through this study, dramatic changes of restructuring and adjusting of the higher education system in the transition of society from a centralized economy and totalitarianism to a market economy and democracy were shaped. The education system, under any circumstances, is large and by marked inertia, however, during the transition process the changes are fundamental being marked by at least four sets of forces:

- a) internal forces, ideologically guided initially seeking a sudden change of mentality in higher education actors (including rejecting some teachers, promoters of the old ideology), it is followed by a stage of conscious adaptation of all actors of the field (teachers, students, officials of central institutions and universities);

Figure 4. Interaction types between universities and their insertion environment



- b) forces from local and regional environments of economical, social and cultural insertion that dictate changing the curriculum;
- c) forces generated by the dynamics of higher education under the influence of global developments, including those created by globalization;
- d) forces that tend to standardize the curricula through supranational policies, specifying the facilitation of labor force movement and rapid recognition of education certificates (for example, involving the European Commission in implementing the Bologna system and achieving the single European Higher Education Area).

Given the multitude of forces involved in the growth rate of adaptation of a higher education system in transition, three types of dramatic changes were shaped. A first major change would be the spatial one, meaning a territorial re-settling of higher education institutions, the second would be qualitative changes, revealing the stages of transition towards a new quality and the third revealing the dynamic of interaction with the society.

These dramatic changes are drawn based on a case study: Romanian higher education system. From analyzing the evolution of higher education systems of former communist states it can be seen that the change processes had a similar development, which strengthens our belief that major changes can be generalized.

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