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The pretext: numerous surveys looking at the state of the higher education system

The implementation of sectoral policies in higher education has become a necessity after the adoption of the new Law on National Education. What should these policies look like in the field of quality assurance in higher education? As a prelude to answering this question, let us briefly examine the context provided by data on the Romanian higher education system. In 2009 through 2011 a series of polls commissioned by ARACIS, UEFISDCDI and ACPART[1] looked at the higher education system. The polls included large samples of actors and stakeholders and were thus able to provide a general image on each of these categories' representations. Chronologically speaking, these groups included:

- Doctoral students and doctoral advisers. The UEFISCDI poll was carried out online between February and March 2009 using a snowballing technique. The 3,111 PhD students who responded represented approximately one ninth of all doctoral students in Romania. As for the 855 respondents among the doctoral advisers, they amount to between one fourth and one third of the total number of such advisers. Though both groups of respondents represent non-probabilistic (availability) samples, they are large enough (in both absolute and relative terms) to make it possible to generalize the results, with the requisite precautions, to the entire population of doctoral students and, respectively, doctoral advisers.

- BA students. The poll commissioned by ARACIS was conducted on a probabilistic sample of 1,500 students by Gallup Romania in May and June 2009. The poll was repeated in 2010 and 2011 and the data was collected by MMT (Metro Media Transilvania – a private Romanian company for social research).

- Faculty. This ARACIS-commissioned poll was carried out on a nationally representative sample of 1,540 faculty in May-June 2009. It was repeated in 2010 and 2011, with data collected by MMT.

- Employers. An ARACIS-commissioned poll was conducted on a nationally representative sample of 1,500 employers' representatives in May and June 2009. It was repeated in 2010 and 2011, with the data collected by MMT.

- Rectors and vice-rectors. In May-June 2009 a number of 134 professors responded to a self-applied questionnaire sent by email by ARACIS to the 330 rectors and vice-rectors in Romania. The sample is not probabilistic but, given the number of respondents, allows us to generalize some of the survey's conclusions.

1 The Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education; the Executive Agency for the Funding of Higher Education, Research, Development and Innovation; and the National Agency for Qualifications in Higher Education, respectively.

- Deans. A number of 236 of the 557 deans in Romanian universities responded to an ARACIS poll, also in May and June 2009. The questionnaire was similar to the one dispatched to the rectors and vice-rectors. The sampling was based on self-selection but the size allows us to generalize some of the conclusions nationally.

- University graduates. 392 graduates in four distinct fields (Mechanical Engineering, Law, IT and Computer Science, Communication Science) were the subjects of a poll commissioned by ARACIS and conducted in March-April 2009 by CEDU 2000+. A similar questionnaire was applied to a group of 142 employers and headhunters in the same fields, thus enabling some useful comparisons between the two stakeholder groups.

- University graduates. A large sample of responses – coming from over 5,000 respondents who graduated from an academic program within the previous 5 years – was collected in June-September 2010 by AB Research on the request of ACPART. The sample is not probabilistic, as the intention was to gather as many responses as possible from as many of the 325 BA academic fields as possible. The large size of the sample and the weighting system used to correct its structure, so as to make it similar to that of the targeted population, enable the results to provide a good picture of these recent graduates.

The goal of this document is to identify some of the more general findings of this series of recent surveys and studies, and ultimately to sketch a general picture of the state of Romanian higher education. We do not aim to be exhaustive, but rather simply to put the spotlight on some of the most significant issues which are repeatedly highlighted by the aforementioned polls, as well as on some of the policy implications which emerge from the empirical analyses. We will advance some possible explanations for this state of affairs, discuss the latter's consequences, and suggest policy measures to national as well as local authorities.

Our discussion will also reflect the wider context of Romanians' views on education in general. We will refer here to two relatively recent surveys conducted on nationally representative samples which deal with a series of matters concerning Romanian education, and Romanian higher education in particular: a Public Opinion Barometer carried out by Gallup and commissioned by the Soros Foundation in May 2007,[2] and a set of items included by IMAS, on the request of Reader's Digest,[3] in an

2 See Mircea Comşa, Claudiu D. Tufiş, Bogdan Voicu. 2007. *Sistemul universitar românesc. Opiniile cadrelor didactice şi ale studenţilor,* Editura Afir, Bucureşti. http://www.osf.ro/ro/documente.php?id_document=455.

3 See the Octombrie 2009 issue of *Reader's Digest Romania*.

August 2009 omnibus poll. Another important source is the 2008 ASG/Totem poll, which was conducted on a representative sample of students.

The context: performance in Romanian education and the media's take on the education system

Before discussing the polls it is important to look at some of their context. We discuss the views of the general population on Romanian education, as well as the outputs of the education system. To obtain a better understanding of what citizens think of the education system and of the dynamics of these popular representations, it is useful to look first at which elements in this system are reflected in the media, and then add some data on the views of the population.

Over the past two or three years, the Romanian media has frequently approached the issue of the quality of education. Its attention was generally occupied with primary and secondary education. Some very weak results relative to most other European countries have been confirmed by a series of successive tests (PISA, TIMSS, PIRLS), while prizes in international school "Olympiads" and the competition among universities seeking to enroll these students defined some of the indicators of performance.

On the one hand, the media has timidly – though with increasingly higher frequency – reported on the results of international tests. On the other, each summer brings with it triumphalist reports of good results in international school Olympiads. We are told that in every discipline Romanian students managed to secure at least two or three medals or prizes. One should notice, though, that results are truly excellent in mathematics and computer science, where the unofficial ranking would constantly place Romania among the top ten countries. In physics, Romania ranks somewhere among the first half of participating countries, while in chemistry and biology the results would place Romania in the second half of the unofficial country rankings.[4]

The media also covers somewhat amply the organization of pre-tertiary education. Decrepit schools or questionable relationships between teachers and students[5] frequently garner public attention and are probably the main type of information on

4 See Mircea Comşa, Claudiu D. Tufiş, Bogdan Voicu. 2007. *Sistemul universitar românesc. Opiniile cadrelor didactice şi ale studenţilor,* Editura Afir, Bucureşti. http://www.osf.ro/ro/documente.php?id_document=455, paginile 39-41.

5 For instance, the tragic case of a student who killed himself because he was in love with one of his teachers was a persistent headline throughout the spring of 2007.

the primary and secondary national education system. This is complemented by unending debates on the size of teachers' wages and by the periodic exposure of various misdeeds during the national testing sessions or the high school graduation exams.

As far as the academic system is concerned, the public debates as reflected in the media consist mostly of cases of divergence from socially acceptable norms or from the law. Scandals concerning fake diplomas, phantom programs, the questionable morality of faculty, or sexual harassment are frequently encountered in the pages of newspapers and are, for all practical purposes, the only issues pertaining to higher education which command the attention of the general public. Romanian universities' position in – or, rather, their absence from – the best known international rankings is reported on rather infrequently. It was only as late as the summer of 2011 that the press started debating a decision by the Ministry of Education, Research, Youth and Sports (MECTS) to rank universities in terms of their study programs and to classify them institutionally.

Another topic of discussion frequently hosted in the media concerns wages in the education system, irrespective of its level. This has been an important subject in political disputes as well, especially after the fall of 2008. However, except for this last matter, the main type of highly visible information in the media concerning education is more frequently negative as far as pre-tertiary education in concerned, and almost completely negative in the case of higher education.

In this context, it appears quite likely that the population should tend to be distrustful of the education system and, in fact, to lose much of the trust in "the Romanian school" which it still proclaimed until not so long ago. The level of trust has been traditionally high, partly as a result of the myth of good results in school Olympiads, but also due to the relatively low expectations of parents. Let us not forget, then, that Romania is one of the poorest countries in terms of its educational capital, as illustrated especially by the low ratio of higher education graduates among its active population. The inertia of positive and negative representations on important social systems such as education or health is particularly strong. The negative or positive representations of these systems are time-resistant and change very slowly. This also means, however, that when representations start to shift the direction of the change can be reversed only with great difficulty. We still trust Romanian education, but the consistent and rapid decrease in the level of trust seems impossible to stem.

Institutional diversity – a social desideratum

This Policy Paper identifies one major goal of educational policies in the field of higher education: institutional diversity. A substantial level of diversity is a healthy attribute of any higher education system, at least because it enriches the range of options available to students and, as a result, because it increases the levels of participation (Birnbaum, 1983). One possible generic definition of diversity is offered by Trow (1995) and quoted by Meek et al. (2000) and Codling and Meek (2006). Trow describes diversity in higher education as

"[...] the existence of distinct forms of post-secondary education, of institutions and groups of institutions within a state or nation that have different and distinctive missions, educate and train for different lives and careers, have different styles of instruction, are organised and funded and operate under different laws and relationships to government" (Codling, Meek, 2006, p. 5).

While the definition above is comprehensive and largely accurate, it remains true that it is particularly difficult to measure the real level of diversity among higher education organizations. Nonetheless, there have been relatively successful attempts to operationalize this concept for the purpose of comparing national higher education systems. Huisman, Meek and Wood (2007), for instance, suggest five variables to measure the degree of institutional diversity: the size of higher education providers (measured in terms of enrolled students); forms of institutional control (public or private, local regional or national); range of disciplines offered or fields of study for which educational services are provided; level of studies or types of degrees awarded (BA, MA, PhD, postgraduate); modes of study (full-time, part-time, short courses, sandwich courses, distance education, blended learning a.s.o.).

A cursory examination of these dimensions in the Romanian case shows that only the first three actually discriminate among Romanian universities (size, property and/or control – which partly overlap as private universities are subject to public control and accreditation to a degree very similar to state institutions –, and partly the fields of study, which helps distinguish between vocational or technical and comprehensive universities). The criteria pertaining to degrees offered and to modes of study discriminate even less, as in these respects the system is highly homogeneous.

On the other hand, the data in the Quality Barometers published yearly between 2009 and 2011 indicate a high degree of institutional homogeneity induced by nationally standardized practices of accreditation and periodic assessment and, in the case of state universities specifically, by the public funding mechanisms, and in

particular by the so-called basic funding system. This homogeneity is apparent in both the educational practices and services offered, and in the views, perceptions, and representations of students and faculty. The latter are quite uniform, as indicated by the low levels of variation in the answers to questions concerning the quality of educational processes. Answers are always positive, both transversally (at national level) and longitudinally speaking. While the answers coming from the actors of the system, be they students or faculty, are very similar and quite congenial – suggesting a set of nationally shared stereotypes on higher education –, the academic practices related to teaching, research, and quality assurance are likewise mimetic. (One special mention needs to be made about answers coming from employers, who are more divergent and thus suggest that more involvement on their part would create better premises for the diversification of university services.)

Using an analogy with biology, one could argue that the diversity of a species is more likely to occur within a heterogeneous environment as organisms adapt to different local conditions. On the contrary, when organisms are exposed to the same environmental conditions, they will tend to develop on a convergent path (Huisman, 1995).

The factors which underlie the demand for educational services constitute the main environmental conditions to which universities are exposed. For a long time, the state was the main buyer of educational services as well as of research provided by universities. Under such circumstances, it is hardly a surprise that the system tended to become more uniform and to encourage isomorphism. However, a series of decentralization and liberalization policies now offers the premises for ecological diversity. For instance, students' ability to choose among educational services is an important factor. If students are able to choose according to their own options, then it is more likely that by aggregating individual preferences the diverse needs of consumers (students) would lead to institutional diversity.

On the other hand, one must also take into account the *social (cultural) construction* of preferences. The history of higher education consumption is a social variable which may determine consumption patterns. Romania has had a long history of centralization in higher education (which is still lingering on, at least in part) and this has yielded certain stereotypical views on higher education, graduates and the labor market. In such a system, the individual preferences of students tend to be rather uniform (e.g., the instrumental, pragmatic motivation for pursuing higher education, which boils down to getting *a higher education degree*, no matter which one, in order to have better access to the job market).

Below, we discuss the opinions of the higher education system's key actors – students, faculty, and employers. As we shall see, these opinions betray a quasi-homogeneous approach to and perceptions of the relevant educational services

and, implicitly, a quasi-homogeneity of options and preferences in what regards the latter.

Satisfaction with higher education services: moving towards consensus?

Irrespective of the type of actor considered – faculty, employers, students, graduates, rectors, deans –, most of the respondents in each category state that they are content with the state of the higher education system. Analyzing these responses quickly grows monotonous given the frequency of stereotypes and the generalized congeniality: large majorities declare themselves rather satisfied with the level of courses, the infrastructure in universities, and access to learning resources. There is also a persistent idea that Romanian higher education is at least as good as higher education in the West. The general image is that of a uniformity of perceptions which suggests homogeneous approaches, visions, and opinions among the main actors of the system.

Among faculty and the leaders of universities and faculties / schools, this attitude is relatively natural: they unsurprisingly entertain a relatively positive view of their own work, even though they may be critical in some respects. This attitude allows them to justify their choice to be a part of the system, as well as their decisions to participate in the top-level administration of universities.

The same could be argued about undergraduates and graduate students: they are in a position to justify their choices, to explain why they are attending a certain BA or doctoral program, why they have opted in favor of a particular university and – especially in the case of PhD students – why they did not choose to study abroad.

Employers, though, could be more critical. They represent the party which is most interested in what concerns the level of training of their employees, their efficiency and productivity. In fact, in comparing the desired level of graduates' competences and the representations of the actual levels, one notices a significant gap – on which we will dwell in future sections. On the other hand, most employers are themselves products of the same educational system or have children enrolled in Romanian higher education. They find it hard to proclaim themselves unhappy about the system's quality, just as they find it difficult to imagine a system that performs much better than the current one.

Last but not least, these actors are themselves Romanian citizens, who – let us not forget – tend to have a positive general image of the education system in general and of academic education in particular, on the quality of teachers (see the Reader's Digest poll), on the positive effects of graduating as far as social status is concerned (as indicated by, among others, the Soros poll of 2007).

On the other hand, some of the sources of this positive uniformization of perceptions reside in the weak institutional differentiation of Romanian higher education. As shown by the *Quality Barometer 2010: The State of Quality in Romanian Higher Education* (Vlăsceanu et al., 2010), the higher education system is confronted with a high level of structural isomorphism, whose causes are diverse, as we shall see presently. There is little wonder that in a weakly differentiated, strongly homogeneous system the perceptions of the main actors are also uniform and even stereotypical.

Obviously, there are subjective factors which contribute to the substance of representations on the education system. They derive from personal experience in interacting with the system, from direct and indirect knowledge of other systems, from personal opportunities, or from young adults' decisions to pursue certain academic programs. As a whole, however, for almost every category of social actors polled in the spring of 2009 (faculty, doctoral students, rectors, deans, employers) there is a relative consensus concerning the relatively high quality of Romanian education.

Longitudinally speaking, a comparison between the current situation and that of a few years back points to a tendency of slowly decreasing optimism. This decrease is small, hard to detect among faculty, and more marked among undergraduates. For the time being, as pointed out above, the image of Romanian education is still positive. But if this tendency continues, it may indicate tensions generated by the diversification of the options, expectations, and interests of the system's actors. Paradoxically, from an ecological perspective these tensions may be beneficial for the development of our higher education. For the time being, though, as far as the relevant actors are concerned, the consistency of options concerning the quality of the system reinforces the status quo rather than reform.

Premises for a different approach: towards building critical communities?

Beyond the consensus, some groups are actually more critical of the system than others. Among faculty, it is the doctoral advisers, the deans, the rectors, and the PhD students who are the most critical, though even these groups maintain, by and large, a mostly positive view on the education system.

Among faculty, the most critical are those boasting higher academic performance. Optimism is lower among academics with more ISI-indexed publications, among those with more articles indexed in international academic databases, those participating in international scientific conferences, those involved in international grants, and those who coordinate national research grants. In other words, faculty

who come into contact with scientific life outside Romania more frequently, as well as those who are active in research nationally, are somewhat more cautious in describing Romanian higher education as high-quality. Yet even these groups tend to have a rather positive image on academic education in this country.

The picture is similar among students, specifically in the case of PhD candidates who participated in international conferences, publish in academic journals abroad, or have been in other European universities on study or research scholarships. Among undergraduates, those who perform best academically are slightly more critical than the rest. Furthermore, students who have been in the system longer are more critical than the others.

All these groups seem to make up the core of potential "critical communities" (Rochon, 1998). These communities are the places where changes take shape. Their membership, which may be initially isolated in terms of its attitudes, may grow numerically until their opinions become strong enough to become relevant to the majority. The slight decrease in optimism concerning the quality of Romanian education between 2007 and 2009, especially among students but also among faculty, may be an indication that such critical communities are emerging. Their views, approaches, perceptions and diverging needs may become influential and put pressure in the direction of institutional differentiation, as said communities seek their own alternative solutions to those currently provided.

The quality of outputs: the gap between the needs of employers and the competences of graduates

Undergraduate and doctoral students, faculty, graduates, deans and rectors all appreciate as rather positive the infrastructure, organization, personal qualities of individuals, and the quality of courses and seminars in Romanian education. The issues which sometimes come to the fore are laboratory infrastructure and online access to academic journals, but even in these respects the actors are rather content.

Some differences emerge when the opinions of different groups are compared. The most important of them, at least in light of its social implications, is the gap between employers' opinions concerning the competences of graduates and the latter's representations of their competences, as well as the opinions of faculty concerning the training of students.

First of all, one must note that employers' opinions are occasionally inconsistent, perhaps suggesting a lack of concern for or of involvement in higher education issues. This may in turn reflect slight concern for the management of human resources,

our mostly manufacturing-based and less knowledge-intensive economy, as well as a rather unstructured labor market which is in need of basic competences and a positive attitude towards work, rather than of high qualifications. Employers tend to believe that graduates do not have good practical training and that a university degree is no guarantee of quality. On the other hand, they are also rather satisfied with the level of abilities and competences of university graduates. Moreover, they prefer graduates of Romanian universities to those who graduated abroad. In other words, there is a sense of relative even though sometimes inconsistent contentment about the general training of university graduates.

So while employers are relatively content about most of the abilities which the graduates have attained, there is a rather considerable gap between what the former would desire as far as graduates' training is concerned and, on the other hand, their actual representations of this training. In other words, although generally satisfied with the level of graduates' training, employers find the latter below the desired level.

This situation may seem paradoxical, but it should be interpreted in the more general context of widespread satisfaction with the state of higher education. Employers simply follow the general pattern of contentment. There are, however, premises for the corrosion of this satisfaction, perhaps as the effect of exigencies which are higher than the perceived quality of graduates. These exigencies will grow as Romanian economy develops.

Furthermore, the representations of faculty on the abilities of undergraduates and graduates are above the employers' threshold of satisfaction with respect to these abilities, but below the aforementioned level of exigency.

Finally, data on graduates and employers in four specific fields (communication sciences, law, IT and computer science, mechanical engineering) suggests that graduates have a more positive representation of their own abilities compared with that of employers judging these capacities at the workplace.

To summarize, while employers have a generally positive perception of graduates, the latter are considered below the desirable level. Moreover, the perceptions of faculty concerning the outputs of higher education are at a level below that of employers. From this perspective, the output of the higher education system risks an overvaluation by those directly involved in it, an overvaluation which is, however, becoming less intense as more diverse needs and expectations are generated by the economy and by society. This creates pressure for the development of new solutions that are more diversified then the existing homogenous ones. On the other hand, the gap between the views of employers and either students or faculty is not, as it has been pointed out, specific to higher education alone: it represents

the expression of a classic behavioral pattern concerning the differences among those within a social system and those without it, the clients of the system or otherwise the beneficiaries of its outputs.

Factors facilitating institutional diversity

Ecological systems have internal regulatory mechanisms. Laissez-faire ideology suggests that market mechanisms should be given complete freedom to generate the system's development towards more diversity. However, educational services work under quasi-market circumstances. Higher education engenders strong informational asymmetry between consumers and providers, and is close to a public good in terms of the externalities it generates, but is at the same time characterized by a general pattern of publicly supported consumption (based on an ideological and value-laden approach which considers the investment in education as public rather than private). Under such circumstances, the involvement of the state in this sector has been quite significant. The state has been not only the main consumer of services provided by universities, but also the main controller / regulator of the system. It is, then, unreasonable to expect increases in diversity, performance or competitiveness to emerge spontaneously. They must be supported through proactive policies.

In and of itself, diversity is self-sustainable. If it is supported through proactive public policies, as access is increasingly made easier and more types of consumers start to benefit from the services of universities – private companies (applied demand), local administration (studies as well as qualified workforce for local markets), adults (lifelong learning) – *the diversification of consumption patterns* grows and generates environmental conditions for institutional diversity. One fundamental precondition is therefore *the access of students to educational services*. The Quality Barometer 2011 shows, however, that over half of the students come from within the county which hosts the academic institution they attend, which suggests that students' mobility remains relatively limited. Yet the latter remains an essential condition, as well as an indicator of students' real ability to choose.

There is, in fact, a whole series of factors which severely limit students' access to educational services, such as social costs and high opportunity costs for studying outside one's locality of residence. Most Romanian universities provide undifferentiated services for the local markets and have a limited ability to attract students nationally (much less internationally). On the other hand, funding is granted to all public universities in a centralized manner, from the public budget, on the basis of a set of uniform criteria. The effect is the replication of one standard model of university at local levels. These consequences are not specific to Romania

alone, as numerous studies show that national systems of higher education exhibit a tendency towards convergence where the environmental conditions conducive to diversification are lacking (Goedegebuure et. all, 1993, Jones, 1996, Dawkins, 1998, Huisman, 2000).

In Romania, in particular, there has been little real involvement on the part of local governments or of private companies as consumers of educational services or academic research. Choices are made in centralized fashion by a state which allocates state-funded places in public universities function of the enrollment capacity evaluated against a set of uniform criteria by ARACIS. For reasons discussed previously, the options of students in private higher education are similarly oriented primarily by proximity to home (which is why many private universities have opened local branches in many smaller localities).

Thus the consumption patterns, both on the part of the state and on the part of students, encourage homogenization and structural isomorphism. On the contrary, the decentralization of funding function of local needs and priorities, the involvement of business in academic governance and/or the purchase of academic knowledge by business, the high mobility (national and European) of consumers – all of these would together would lead to a more complex architecture of the market of higher education services.

Besides the environmental conditions, Huisman (2000) lists a series of factors which may facilitate or inhibit institutional diversity. The list includes state involvement through regulations and funding, competitiveness or (formal and informal) classifications. As for competition, Geiger (1996) showed that in periods of vigorous economic growth, as resources flood the market, new providers emerge to capitalize on the new opportunities by simply emulating traditional providers. When demand grows robustly, competition goes down as the need for providers to capitalize on consumption niches decreases, given the increased number of consumers. In such cases providers grow by simply expanding the volume of their share on a growing market and not by increasing their market share through the redistribution of resources among providers. In game theoretical terms, this is a *win-win* situation rather than a zero-sum game. Competition is weak, and so is the need to diversify. On the contrary, recessions compel providers to innovate and invent new markets and new services to attract consumers and maintain market share. Hard times encourage diversity, according to Geiger (1996, p. 200).

In Romania, the poorly qualified workforce and the low ratio of higher education graduates in the active population have led to a strong demand for educational services after 1990. This explains the growth of private providers of weakly differentiated, profoundly mimetic educational services after December 1989 (even though, as they were established, most private providers of educational services

claimed they represented an alternative to the state universities).

To a considerable extent, this is still true today, as statistics show that we have a higher education deficit in the active population. This has been changing as the age cohorts targeted by higher education (18-29) have dwindled, though, to partly offset this trend, more students have come from older generations which did not have the opportunity to attend university education. On the other hand, the many poor, below passing grades at the high school graduation examinations in 2011 put pressure on private providers to attract students by diversifying their education offer. Last but not least, the economic crisis has had its own beneficial effects as far as diversity is concerned – such as more expensive capital, which determines universities to innovate in fund-raising.

In what follows, we will use some empirical data in order to discuss the current premises for an increase in the quality and diversity of services provided by higher education institutions.

The massification of higher education

One of the trends of the past decades has been a decline in the number of those who believe that there are too many students and, as a result, to many graduates of higher education. Furthermore, objectively speaking, as almost everywhere else in the world, the number of university graduates has been on the rise. This is a reflection of at least four important processes:

- an increase in life expectancy, which results in additional educational time to everyone, as well as a greater need for competences with a longer life;

- the increase in productivity, coupled with the current economic stagnation or contraction, which together diminish the need for labor force; decrease the labor market's ability to immediately absorb new generations; and create the societal premises for funding time spent in education and for public and private investment in the development of human capital, targeting a more rapid insertion in the labor market;

- an increase in the complexity of knowledge and of everyday life and, implicitly, of the volume and quality of abilities needed to cope with society;

- an increase in individual interest in knowledge and self-fulfillment, a modern process which has been accelerating in post-modernity.

As a less developed society, Romania is behind most EU states as far as the ratio

of higher education graduates in concerned. Also, current levels of participation in higher education are not as high as the media, the public opinion and many political decision-makers usually claim. For 2009-2011, the number of students as a percentage of the general population between 18 and 29 years of age places us around the EU average. But since the gap in terms of the percentage of the active population holding a higher education degree is still large, the process of massification will probably continue, while the number of students will likely increase. As a matter of fact, the massification process has not reached phase two, as quantitative inequalities of access are still substantial and closely reflect social structure (Voicu & Vasile, 2009).

Under these circumstances, and with a pre-tertiary education system whose performance will, judging by results in international tests, stagnate for a while, the filter of admission to higher education will become increasingly permissive. Higher education is not a matter for elites alone, and the average quality of the student will decrease gradually if performance in primary and secondary schooling does not increase.

On an expanding market, pressure for diversification and for the increase in the quality of services will be weak without state intervention.

Policy options

Moving beyond social and economic conditions, the state is, in Romania, the most significant factor in the structuring of the higher education service market, especially given its roles as a nationally dominant consumer, regulator and funding agency. Last years' policies have not only failed to contribute to diversification, but have actually created pressure towards conformity and convergence (Miroiu & Andreescu, 2010). While centralized funding, the "historical" levels of allocations (allocations for previous years determine to considerable degree those for the current year), or funding criteria which do not substantially discriminate among universities on the basis of the quality indicators used by the National Council for Higher Education Funding (CNFIS) have been among the strong factors leading to convergence, the evaluation and accreditation procedures have likely been the most active forces pushing towards conformism and structural isomorphism (Miroiu & Andreescu 2010, Vlăsceanu et al., 2010, Păunescu et al., 2011).

Assessment and accreditation methodologies based on nationally uniform standards and indicators, uniform procedures, and a unique register of evaluating experts who were professionally socialized in the procedures of the central accrediting agency (ARACIS) decreased the degree of institutional diversity. They put in place

strong incentives for mimetic behavior, which decreases uncertainty and the risks associated with institutional and program accreditation. On the contrary, innovative behavior incurs greater risks and costs, without promising corresponding rewards either from the market (which is itself weakly differentiated, as pointed out above) or from the state. As a matter of fact, not only has the state failed to actively promote differentiation, but it inhibits it through the standardized general procedures through which it allocates key resources: funding (to state universities), as well as enrollment capacities (which ultimately translate in financial resources) and reputation (in terms of institutional or program evaluations). The latter two affect both state and private higher education institutions equally.

Under the current conditions of weak natural institutional differentiation, and given the pervasive environmental conditions, it is essential that the state should act as an active promoter of institutional diversity in higher education through coherent policies.

Moreover, the very role of the state as the main actor on the market of educational services, both traditionally and in reality, imbues its policies with systemic effects. This is somewhat different, for instance, from countries where the market operates with greater independence from the state (the US, Australia, New Zealand etc.). While the last two decades have witnessed some efforts towards diversification, they have been insufficient. Nonetheless, they may be regarded as premises for this socially desirable feature:

- Public-private differentiation, function of the ownership of higher education providers. Data in the Quality Barometers published between 2009 and 2011 show that this is one of the variables which matters most in the perceptions and representations of faculty and students, which in turn suggests it may well be an element of real differentiation.

- Differentiation of domains or fields of the educational services: specialized universities and technical universities, on the one hand, and comprehensive institutions, on the other. The current tendency is one of generalization, as universities try to increase the number of specializations they offer in order to be able to capitalize on a wider section of the market. This is not the same as the diversification of services and adaptation thereof function of students' different needs or of the competences demanded by the labor market. As a result, there is an inflation of, for instance, legal and economic academic programs which cannot be integrated into the market, while there is a deficit of graduates from technical programs.

Recent central policies under the Law on National Education (no. 1/2011) are designed to generate increased institutional diversity. One such measure is the

classification of universities into three classes – research-intensive, research-and-teaching, and education-intensive. On the other hand, in the absence of other complementary mechanisms classifications and hierarchies themselves do not necessarily lead to a higher level of diversity (Huisman, 2006). If classifications are turned into league tables, and resources are allocated function of institutional position in this hierarchy, then mimetic behaviors and convergent tendencies of the organizations at the bottom of the pack will become stronger and the long-term result is more rather than less homogeneity. To create premises for diversification, the differentiation of universities into classes needs to be backed by policies for differentiated funding for the three classes, with similar resources allocated to each class in order to encourage specific performance within the class rather than upward mobility.

Quality assurance: between massification and academic performance

The quality of the performance of universities and academics is a subject on the public agenda in most European countries. The debate touches upon three important issues: (1) which is the role of the university under the conditions of massification discussed above? (2) is it justified to demand a quantitative assessment of academic performance? (3) how should such an assessment be conducted? ARACIS is already a well-established agency nationally and internationally. It is a member of the European Quality Assurance Registry (EQAR), the most exclusivist of all European and global quality assurance associations. It has proven able to manage and differentiate among institutional distributions of quality. The further consolidation of ARACIS is as necessary to the system and institutions of higher education as it is useful to them.

The context of massification heightens the tension between the university as a producer and, respectively, as a transmitter of knowledge. Simply put, the dilemma can be translated into finding a proper balance between teaching and research.

Modern universities are generally defined as *research universities*. The central idea behind the overt interest in academic research is present in a tacitly accepted program which may be outlined in terms of five points: (i) one cannot teach without a deep understanding of what one teaches, and understanding comes from direct practice, including research; (ii) there is no good teaching without a direct contact with the latest developments in one's field; (iii) the university has always been the place where knowledge was produced, which is increasingly important in societies defining themselves in terms of "knowledge economies"; (iv) research is profitable when it leads to patents which may be used on the market, attract funds to universities, and enable partnerships with business (partnerships which

in turn increase the employability of graduates); and (v) research justifies a large number of doctoral students being involved in research labs where they develop competences that are useful on the labor market.

Practically speaking, research confirms the social utility of the university and justifies its role as an actor which provides graduates with a place in society. The dominant opinion among Romanian faculty clashes with the current thinking on the function of the university. To Romanian academics, according to the 2010 and 2011 polls commissioned by ARACIS, the priority seems to be teaching. Although described as important, research is consigned to a subordinate position.

However, the market on which Romanian universities are competing is global. This makes it important for them to be able to perform well at least in a European environment.

Practically all major international rankings are based on research indicators and, where possible, on indicators such as the level of prestige attributed by academics to universities other than their own, the quality of teaching as assessed by students, and the opinions of employers on the quality of graduates. The assessment of research capacity usually considers its results in terms of patents and publications. In case of the latter, their value, measured in terms of the number of citations, is considered of outmost importance.

The emergence of university rankings and league tables has been accelerated by concern for the efficiency of educational processes. As a good which society purchases from the universities, higher education is the object of constant evaluation by consumers and by independent auditors. In Great Britain or Germany, to cite just two prominent examples, the assessment process is institutionalized and involves huge resources; national polls have been conducted on samples of over 150,000 students. In Romania, such a large-sale endeavor would be virtually impossible at this point, not so much due to the costs it would involve, but primarily for logistical reasons: for instance, the absence in universities of the practice of offering students institutional emails, which complicates tremendously the ability to contact them. Poorly maintained enrollment records which are, in many cases, incomplete create further difficulties in tracking graduates.

Beyond these issues, quantitative criteria for performance assessment remain an objective which chimes in with contemporary developments in higher education. Such an exercise would enable realistic financial allocations, rather than allocations dictated by debatable criteria (and sometimes expressed simplistically as “this is what intuition suggests”). Practically, the immediate result of the classification of universities and academics is better information for potential students and a better ability for society as a whole to allocate resources, based on a diversity of criteria,

to universities within distinct categories. These categories are supposed to answer different social needs (e.g., some may involve training for the local labor market or, alternatively, may refer to internationally relevant and validated research). Funding should be differentiated and earmarked function of diverse local and/or national priorities.

Judging from the opinions polled in 2010 and 2011 by ARACIS, Romanian academics believe that the classification of universities is necessary. Their perspectives are, however, generally different from the international practice in so far as the selection of assessment criteria is concerned. At the center of these criteria is the human resource, defined as a whole in terms of the qualifications of faculty, followed by the quality of teaching. The ability to generate results in research is at best a secondary criterion, almost negligible in weight by comparison with teaching. These results dovetail with the general uniformity of views, the weak differentiation of institutions, and the stereotype of the “university as a space of edification”.

For its part, the Romanian Ministry of Education, Research, Youth and Sports (MECTS) made a series of extremely important strategic decisions in the university classification and program ranking exercises which it started in 2011. The most significant was that of according great weight to research and its production measured by reference to international standards. This reflects the dominant paradigm in Europe with respect to the role of universities, as briefly sketched above. These criteria are not fully accepted by Romanian academics, who, as also discussed above, would have their own qualifications and the quality of teaching – which is always hard to quantify – as the weightiest criteria.

The second major decision of the Ministry was to place great emphasis on so-called “extensive indicators”. In the academic program rankings, the central authority opted not to judge outputs relative to the human resources available. What mattered, for example, was the absolute number of publications, rather than the per capita number. This puts large universities at considerable advantage, as they have more professors who publish, as a whole, more works and apply for more patents than smaller institutions. This development model is, as a consequence, a centralist one and it seems to aim to promote a small number of big universities.

The basic idea behind awarding prizes to large universities is that it maintains continuity with the funding policy practiced over the past decades: money is allocated primarily to those universities which have enjoyed more funds in the past and were able to accommodate large bodies of academics. Yet their link to performance cannot be guaranteed. On the other hand, these universities’ chance to make it into the major international rankings, such as the ARWU (Shanghai) or the THE, are thereby improved, since these rankings are focused on the largest (in

size) of the worlds' around 16,000 universities.[6]

Furthermore, a small number of large universities provide a small recruitment basis for teaching and research staff. The concentration of these large institutions in the large cities, which is the case at the present time, decreases the likelihood of keeping the best graduates in universities: they will often be more attracted to the larger incomes promised by the private market, by politics or by other private sectors which are more accessible in the biggest 5 or 6 cities than in the rest of this country's cities and towns, where academics' wages may be, by contrast, comparable to the largest accessible incomes in the region.

There is a third relevant policy option made by the Ministry (MECTS) in what regards the classification of universities and the ranking of study programs: while the Romanian classification did relativize scores function of each specific field of study, it did not also normalize these relative scores subsequently. In other words, since the standards of each specific field are taken into account, scores in different fields can be aggregated for each specific university, an option which is familiar from the THE and the CHE rankings, which thus avoid, for instance, the overvaluation of performance in medicine, engineering or the exact sciences to the detriment of the social sciences. However, normalization – which is used in the THE but not in the ARWU rankings – would have enabled the ranking exercise to give additional weight to good performance in those fields where the variation among departments is greater. The Ministry's option in the ranking of the vast majority of programs was to avoid normalization, which means that it is advantageous to do well in fields where there are no major differences among departments. This choice discourages the institutional diversification project, as well as the diversification of study programs.

All of the above suggests that the current stage of university classification and program rankings lends only limited support to the project of institutional diversification. In principle, the classification of universities into distinct categories, with different missions and objectives responding to multiple needs, does assist in the diversification project. On the other hand, the implementation of the classification exercise in terms of a methodology which awards large universities to the detriment of smaller ones (size does matter!), which is not truly multi-criterion (especially because it reifies research indicators), and does not normalize the variation among fields (thus preventing valid comparisons among them), will discourage diversity

6 One must note that this choice in the ARWU (Shanghai) is determined by the difficulty of collecting data enabling one to relativize the global scores. This option – relativizing function of the size of departments – may be encountered in university classifications in a single national system, such as the CHE Ranking in Germany. The most familiar ranking of world universities, the THE – Thompson Reuter Rankings (carried out by Times Higher Education and Thompson Reuter) relativizes to the size of universities for most indicators considered, including those concerning publications, though until 2011 the differences among fields were not considered.

and stimulate universities and programs to copy the successful ones.

General implications for the legitimacy of academic system reforms

It is not by accident that we have been almost obsessively arguing here that the general image of Romanian higher education is rather positive for all the actors questioned in the recent polls, with the exception of undergraduate students, whose views on the matter are split.

In offering outlines of the opinion polls introduced in the beginning of this study, we have been often reminded that these responses are congenial, that the actors express their satisfaction with the system fearing that they might be subsequently sanctioned, especially given the suspicion that anonymity is not insured in online collection of data. And yet the latter was clearly not the case with the polls based on face-to-face questionnaires administered by Gallup to representative samples of students, faculty and employers. Furthermore, what could those who are not really a part of the system (employers or graduates) really be afraid of?

On the other hand, there is the relative lack of differentiation among opinions: in the majority of fields examined, relatively large majorities express the dominant opinions, and the latter reflect the relative satisfaction with particular elements of the educational system.

This relative satisfaction, as argued above, does flagrantly contrast with the academic performance of Romanian universities. As far as the qualifications of graduates are concerned, employers are content despite the fact that there is still a gap between these perceived qualifications and their stated exigencies, while the picture entertained by faculty and graduates seems much more optimistic than that of the employers. Finally, there is a slight decrease in the population's level of trust of the educational system.

Some critical communities have proposed reforms of the education system starting from its lower performance and the failure to meet the exigencies of employers. However, we believe that the system cannot be changed against the will of those who compose it. Without their assent, any incremental change undergoes the risk of failed implementation, as informal rules perpetuate the status quo even while formal ones set transformational goals.

Implicitly, then, since the picture of the education system entertained by its main actors is a positive one, any strategy aiming at change cannot start by referring to the failures and the qualities of the current system. On the other hand, change cannot be promoted in the absence of a discussion of the methods used throughout

the world today and of what they may teach us.

It is in this context that the weak points and the strengths of the education system may be identified and acknowledged by the society at large, both institutionally speaking and from the point of view of human resources and of individual responsibility (whether that of students or of faculty). Furthermore, while high performance should be rewarded and mediocrity should not be promoted, the latter should also not be sanctioned. This may provide faculty with the motivation to pursue those models which are perceived as successful, irrespective of their opinions on the current state of the system.

Popularizing and publicly debating the ways in which academic performance is measured is another necessity highlighted by the responses to our questionnaires. For instance, it seems that the debates concerning articles indexed in ISI or other international databases are a remote concern for the great majority of faculty, who lack a clear understanding of and information about journal rankings and indexing systems. While this information is hardly absent, what is comparatively missing are debates on indexing, on indexing versus journal rankings, on the significance and ways of measuring the scientific impact of a publication, as well as on impact factors versus indexing versus academic journal rankings. Discourses on these matters seem to fall squarely into two classes: one affirming the necessity of scientometric instruments, without discussing their weak points; and one rejecting them by default, without considering the relevant lower-level goals.

Most university leaders are particularly keen on research and give successes in this respect a prominent place among the achievements of their university or faculty. To the larger society, however, the real element of prestige is teaching and, moreover, teaching in a sense that is different from the one typically pursued in what Charles Tilly defined as the modern “research-university”. The outcome is that faculty are interested in having as many students as possible, since this has a direct impact on social status. There are, furthermore, a number of institutionalist explanations for this state of affairs: the main reason for the preference of faculty – but also of academic leaders – for teaching is that having more students is the most direct and simple way of raising revenue for the university. A decision at societal level on the importance of universities’ involvement or non-involvement in research, as well as on research outside universities (whether in private companies or in publicly funded organizations) may assist Romanian universities in defining themselves, especially as most deans and rectors believe there is a need for universities to grow more different from each other.

The recent university classification and program ranking exercises are just a few steps in this direction. Together with new standards in granting academic titles, they may contribute to increasing the quality of university education. But they need

a sustained effort directed at the internalization of the principles and structure of modern education, and this project needs time before it can truly achieve its ends to a satisfactory degree.

Perhaps a policy aimed at attracting foreign academics would create the kind of environment that accelerates change. But for this to happen it is important to develop, on a larger scale than is currently the case, programs in languages other than Romanian. Furthermore, on the long run it would be helpful to attract young academics from abroad. And while it is true that wages are still far from being competitive, fiscal facilities may be considered in order to offset this limitation (similar to, for instance, the tax exemptions for a period of 2 or 3 years that are offered in the Netherlands).

Some suggestions on future diversity-stimulating policies

In the previous sections we discussed some of the measures recently undertaken to reform higher education and we analyzed their implications on institutional diversity. We have shown how the current opinion trends among faculty, as well as the current reforms carried out by the state – the university classification and program rankings –, are only partly able to stimulate institutional diversity. They need to be doubled by coherent, sustained policies for the allocation of financial incentives and the differentiation of university practices and strategies aimed at responding to diverse needs. In what follows we shall dwell on some of these policies.

Decentralization, deregulation and increasing real university autonomy in the administration of human and financial resources, as well as in the organization of courses, are diversity-enhancing policies. Currently, full- and part-time academic programs are regulated nationally. Pedagogical theories suggest, however, that there is a much broader spectrum of ways of organizing learning. One example is blended learning, which involves diverse ways of delivering education on a continuum between traditional face-to-face and online interaction. Strict regulation of delivery methods might inhibit the emergence of more diversified educational formats which respond better to individual needs and are also able to better stimulate access to higher education. Furthermore, the existing regulations concerning the two types of program organization mentioned above (full- and part-time) encourage universities to copy both, since these become the *socially validated recipes* and the *opportunities for the formal organization* of educational services. More institutional autonomy in selecting the most efficient and adequate ways of organizing learning as a function of student characteristics, individual preferences or pedagogical adequacy – e.g., without a distinct centralized certification of both forms of education – would increase the diversity of services, at least with respect to the organization of learning.

The decentralization of financial support for local educational priorities is another measure which could increase diversity and the correlation of educational services with the needs of the labor market and of local economies. The active involvement of social partners in funding-related decisions, both nationally and locally, as well as in academic governance are also among the key ways of promoting institutional diversity.

Quality assurance must be differentiated depending on the profile of university classes or categories by establishing clear links between university classification and program rankings, on the one hand, and ARACIS's quality assurance methodology, on the other hand. There should be no contradictions between the general "trust" ratings conferred by ARACIS and the position in one of the three classes of institutions. Research-intensive universities have their own profiles, as do the other classes. As a consequence, it is essential to account for these differences in the ARACIS quality assessment methodology. At the same time, ARACIS is in a position to collaborate more closely with specialized councils in the fields of research (the National Council for Scientific Research, CNCS) or human resources (the National Council for the Attestation of University Titles, Degrees, and Certificates, CNATDCU), both for the general and the periodic assessment of master's and doctoral programs.

A multi-criterion allocation of institutional financial incentives is, in our view, one of the most efficient public policies aimed at achieving better performance while supporting institutional diversity. The adoption of the new public funding methodology for higher education which is tightly connected to quality standards promoted through the new ARACIS methodology is one way to promote a coherent and convergent set of policies in higher education.

Perhaps the most important policy measure is directed at the factor which currently induces the strongest pressure towards conformity and isomorphism, specifically the current methodology for the external assessment of universities under Government Decision 1418/2006. The current methodology is based on a set of uniform criteria, standards, and indicators for institutional and program evaluation. Specifically, in order to be accredited or confirmed (through periodic evaluations) providers of educational services must prove that they meet a certain pre-established threshold for the indicators prescribed by the methodology. The universities' focus on meeting minimum indicators in a unique set in order to obtain accreditation, which is a strategic resource in the higher education system, leads to conformism and homogeneity. Under these circumstances, changing the methodology for external evaluation of universities is essential.

A possible transformative solution in the field of quality assurance is suggested by the model of fourth-generation evaluations described by Guba and Lincoln (1989).

The first three generations were assessment as measurement, assessment as description, and assessment as judgment (based on a set of criteria). A general issue raised by these models was their failure to recognize the *diversity of values, perceptions and interests* of the system's actors.

While the current perceptions of Romanians indicate a high level of consensus, as previously suggested the seeds of a differentiation-inducing tension have been sowed and this tension should be supported rather than resisted. There are, on the other hand, the values which derive from the experiences and the directions pursued by other countries, and which show that in a knowledge economy we need strong research universities able to support innovation even though the preferences or educational needs of a majority of students or the labor market are comparatively more modest. We need a proactive educational system rather than one which simply reacts to existing stimuli.

The fourth-generation evaluation identified by Guba and Lincoln tries to resolve these problems by acknowledging *value pluralism*. It is based on a constructivist, anti-positivist paradigm. Constructivist assessments are based on the notion that interests, needs, values, interpretations, and meanings are conflict-ridden and that none of them are inherently superior to the others. There are, however, methods to ensure consensus, which consist of documenting all interpretations, interests, and values and negotiating the ones which are most relevant in a given situation (Cerkez, 2010). The approach is one in which the contextual significances of "quality" are *socially constructed*.

By contrast, positivist approaches start with a definition of the ideal quality of an educational provider or program, a definition premised on the epistemic authority of a certain theory or of the law (Government Emergency Ordinance 75/2005 is, for instance, prescriptive in establishing a single definition of quality). This definition is then operationalized as a single set of standards and indicators against which the entities under evaluation (universities or study programs) are compared. The assessment for accreditation against a uniform set of indicators is thus a typically positivist form of evaluation which is most likely to lead to the homogenization of a certain field where it is uniformly applied. Under the constructivist approach advocated here, evaluation becomes however a collaborative project based on negotiations, displaying mostly a formative rather than a summative focus, and aimed at improvement. The role of the evaluator changes from that of a technical expert or controller / judge into that of a negotiator or moderator. Together with the evaluated entity (be it a university or study programme), a consensus is sought as well as agreeing on the most relevant indicators applicable to a particular situation of evaluation based on reaching a common understanding of that entity's objectives and mission.

Thus, in our view, the transformations in the current methodology for external evaluation should be aimed at increasing diversity and therefore should be based on the philosophy of fourth-generation assessments. A principle subsumed to that of value pluralism is *fitness-for-purpose* in the design of both internal and external evaluations. Such a policy would relativize the currently uniform way of "rewarding success" through accreditation and external evaluation by introducing alternative ways to evaluate and assure quality that are adequate to the local conditions and especially to institutional and program goals. In order to minimize the coercive isomorphism and to encourage universities to innovate in designing endogenous quality assurance systems, one must change the role of the central agency in the field (ARACIS) from that of a *controller* and *certifier* to that of a *facilitator* of quality. Such a facilitator provides specific services of assistance to universities that design their own quality assurance systems, rather than, as is currently the case, provides external certification services to society at large. This change should nonetheless be doubled by a benchmarking system enabling universities to identify and assess themselves against comparable providers of educational services as well as making it possible for beneficiaries to make informed decisions. Benchmarking would thus be conducive to a diversified typology of educational service providers (comparable across a common but not unique set of indicators), a solution that contrasts with the currently unique set of national indicators.

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