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From Bologna to Bucharest. Reforming Romanian higher education system

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Introduction

Higher education is considered to be an important policy obligation of the European Union member states¹. The Europeanization process brought education and higher education in particular, on the agenda of the Council of Europe and of the European Union which manifested a high degree of interest in the design and implementation of the policies which concerns it. We identify two European-level policy developments: the first one refers to the reforms made in the higher education process which were initiated by the Bologna Process and the second one concentrates on the research aspects of the European Union's Lisbon strategy for jobs and for growth². However, neither the Bologna Process nor the Lisbon Strategy can be regarded as a comprehensive basis for the action commenced by the European Union in field of higher education³. The Bologna Process is considered as being an intergovernmental commitment aiming to reform the higher education systems that extends beyond the European Union, and the Lisbon Strategy is seen as an important piece of the European Union economic platform that extends beyond the higher education sector⁴. Nevertheless both documents are establishing and developing an important policy framework for the European Union in sector of higher education⁵.

The main directions of the Bologna Process and of the Lisbon Strategy are an important step in broadening the involvement of the European Commission in designing policies concerning the higher education systems.⁶ These processes lay emphasis on the role played by the Commission's policy decisions which shaped the higher education discourse in Europe. The continuous association of the Commission with the two processes are leading to important debates all around Europe regarding the path which should be followed by higher education in the future.⁷

This research investigates the evolution of the system of higher education in Romania starting with the ratification and implementation of the Bologna Accords in 1999 and up to present. Also through this research we explore what the influence was of the enlargement process on the Romanian policy making, governmental programs, decision-making and the accountability of

¹Ruth KEELING, The Bologna Process and the Lisbon Research Agenda: the European Commission's expanding role in higher education discourse, *European Journal of Education*, Vol.41, No.2, 2006, p.203.

² *Ibidem.*

³ *Ibidem.*

⁴ *Ibidem.*

⁵ *Ibidem.*

⁶ *Ibidem.*

⁷ *Ibidem.*

higher education.⁸ It also aims to provide possible solutions which could develop the European higher education system in the context of the European enlargement.

The main questions which will be addressed are related to the changes which occurred in the Romanian higher education system as consequence of the Bologna Process and how did the enlargement process contributed to the development and to the changes within the higher education system. We find useful to begin the research by making a counterfactual inquiry about the evolution of the higher education system in the in the absence of the framework created by the Treaty of Maastricht which sets the limits of the European Union's actions in support of the member states which should encourage "international mobility" and the "European dimension".⁹ In the recent years the Commission has the possibility to develop a wide range of programs to facilitate the cooperation between universities under the SOCRATES framework. The Commission promotes a series of programs aiming to promote language support (LINGUA), distance and e-learning (MINERVA), adult education (GRUNDTVIG), the relationship with non-member countries through TEMPUS or Asia-Link."¹⁰ We undertake, from the beginning of our research, to appraise the relationship between processes of European enlargement and its effects on the European Higher Education Area and in particular on the Romanian Higher Education System.¹¹

The central premise of our research assesses the capacity of the relationship between the governments, higher education institutions and of the other major actors to sustain the goals promoted by the Bologna Process. The second track of the research addresses the need of the institutions to develop strategies to implement the objectives of the Lifelong education agenda and how to take advantage of the changes which occurred with the implementation of the Bologna Process.¹² Higher education institutions are required to use correctly in order to be able to enhance the capability and the mobility programs, flexible learning and the student-centred learning process. Also, the universities have to further develop the multi-level dialogue in order to meet the current needs of a society where the economy and the knowledge are rapidly evolving. The answer to these questions represents the confirmation that the social objective of providing quality higher education to a large quota of citizens is being fulfilled.¹³

The research examines the problems of the higher education system and the process of European enlargement, following two approaches; the first one makes a theoretical-empirical evaluation based on

⁸Jo GRANGER, Reforming higher education for lefelong learning and enlargement of the European Union, *New Perspectives for Learning- Briefing Paper 57*, December, 2004, p.1.

⁹Ruth KEELING, The Bologna Process and the Lisbon Research Agenda: the European Comission's expanding role in higher education discourse, *European Journal of Education*, Vol.41, No.2, 2006, p.204.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*.

¹¹David CROSIER, Lewis PURSER, Hanne SMIDT, Trends V: Universities shaping the European Higher Education Area, An EUA Report, *European University Association*, 2005, p.11-13.

¹² *Ibidem*.

¹³ *Ibidem*.

the pre-existing literature in the field, and the second one is being constructed through the evaluation of the statistical and empirical data available for the University of Bucharest. The research will be conducted following a bottom-up approach in an attempt to tackle the relationship between the reform of the Romanian Higher Education System under the Bologna process and the process of European enlargement from 2007 onwards.

Brief history of the Bologna Process

The Bologna Process bridges a gap between the education systems in the European countries aiming to create a European standard for higher education. Its foundation was laid in 1999 by the Bologna Accords and further developed by the ministerial meetings of Prague (2001), Berlin (2003), Bergen (2005), London (2007) and Leuven (2009).¹⁴ Its main goal is to “raise the competitiveness of the education system in Europe”¹⁵; it promotes the convergence of the national educational systems within the European Higher Education Area¹⁶, encouraging both professors and students to bring their contributions for the improvement of the quality of the European Higher Education System.

The 1999 declaration introduces “six main goals” assumed by the European Ministers for Education: “adoption of a system of easily readable and comparable degrees; adoption of a system essentially based on two main cycles, undergraduate and graduate; establishment of a system of credits – such as in the ECTS; promotion of mobility by overcoming obstacles to the free movement of students, teachers, researchers and administrative staff; promotion of European co-operation in quality assurance; promotion of the necessary European dimensions in higher education”¹⁷.

The Prague 2001 declaration further developed the process, introducing the rights of the „students to be recognized as full and equal partners in the decision making process and ESIB became a consultative member of the Bologna follow-up group (together with the Council of Europe; further stressed the social dimension of the process and highlighted that higher education is a public good and responsibility”¹⁸. Furthermore, the Berlin declaration of 2003 underlined the

¹⁴“The Official Bologna Process Website 2010-2012.” *History of EHEA*. EHEA Official Website. accessed 12 May 2012. <<http://www.ehea.info/article-details.aspx?ArticleId=3>>.

¹⁵Mircea COMSA, Claudiu D. TUFIS, Bogdan VOICU, *Sistemul Universitar Românesc – Opiniile cadrelor didactice și ale studenților*, (Romanian Higher Education System – Positions of the professors and students), SOROS Romania Trust, Bucharest, 2007, p. 45.

¹⁶“The Official Bologna Process Website 2010-2012.” *Members of the EHEA*. European Higher Education Area. Accessed at 12 May 2012. <<http://www.ehea.info/members.aspx>>.

¹⁷“Bologna for Pedestrians.” *Higher Education and Research*. Council of Europe. Accessed at 12 May 2012. http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/highereducation/ehea2010/bolognapedestrians_en.asp.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*.

importance of research and the need for congruence between the EHEA and the European Research Area.

By 2005 Romania experienced little progress in achieving the goals of the Bologna Process, the main drawbacks being the capacity to assure the quality of the higher education system, a very low integration within the international system and the reduced access to the second cycle of studies. Two years later, the Romanian higher education system has already experienced significant progress to the integration in the EHEA, and an increase of the overall quality of the system could be noticed. The change to the three level educational system spanning over eight years is still perceived by a majority of the professors as being the fundamental dimension of the Bologna process. This change was what brought the process in the spotlights, a number of members of the academia being against easing the access to second and third levels of higher education – as they perceived them to be worthy only for the elites. Another reason against the changes was considered to be the smaller number of courses required to graduate which would lead to endanger a significant number of academic positions and a possible downfall of the wages. A reaction to this was the adaptation of the academia in order to preserve the same number of academic positions while compressing the teaching hours.

A second fundamental improvement is represented by the European Credits Transfer System (ECTS) and the increasing mobility of the students; we have to give special considerations to the European Community Action Scheme for the Mobility of the University Students, or ERASMUS Program. As a pitfall we notice that in the Romanian private universities a near majority of the students are unaware of the ECTS system, which is also a cause of the reduced awareness of the ERASMUS Program. A similar degree of awareness is to be seen in smaller universities, with less than 500 students, where the number of professors unaware of the program is also very high. It has to be noticed that only in public universities a majority of the professors openly admit that the ECTS are fully transferable. Even though the mobility of the students is fully supported and integrated, the mechanisms needed to endorse it are yet to be further developed. We can identify the lack of awareness as being the main drawback of the program – in some circumstances a supposed partial recognition of the courses undertaken within the program is a solid reason which lowers the number of students willing to enrol.

A series of studies conducted by independent bodies on the framework designed by the European Universities Association and the increase of the number of foreign students enrolled in Romanian universities from one year to another confirm the steady commitment of the Romanian Higher Education System for the fully integration within the EHEA.

The impact of the enlargement process on the ERASMUS program in Romania's higher education system

An important factor which is to be considered when we analyse the Romanian higher education system and the student mobility is that of the challenges faced by the country in the process of reform and in building a modern state. This drawback can be noted in the quality of the higher education system and in the reduced capacity of the Romanian institutions to attract foreign students.¹⁹

Romania is considered to be a net “exporter” of higher education, the number of foreigners coming to Romanian universities being significantly lower than the one of the Romanian professors or students going to a foreign university.²⁰ We notice a steady increase in the number of the Romanian students enrolled in foreign universities through exchange programs, while the number of the incoming foreign students is declining.²¹ “The percentage of Romanian students which are studying in Europe was 2.4% in 2004 and is has been moving upward during last years, so that it has overcome the European average²², of 2.2%”.

Even though the mobility of the students runs in both directions, a majority of the students of the University of Bucharest left the country for new experiences and better access to information. The most popular destinations for Romanians are to be found in the Western Europe – France, Germany, Hungary, Italy – it is also important to notice the increasing number of students which are going to the United States of America.²³

“Higher education institutions in Romania have actively been involved in SOCRATES and LEONARDO da VINCI programs since 1997. Starting from 1998 the University of Bucharest took part in a series of projects developed within the CEEPUS Program (Central European Exchange for University Students Program) which aimed to promote student mobility for full academic studies, master’s and doctorate programs, as well as exchanges between teaching staff and researchers²⁴”.

The social dimension of the Bologna Process is considered as being a necessary condition for the appeal and competitiveness of the European Higher Education Area²⁵. This infers that the continuous necessity to make higher education of high quality equally accessible to all, and stress the need for appropriate conditions for students so that they can complete their studies without

¹⁹ Monica ROMAM, Faima MIZIKACI, Zizi GOSCHIN, The Bologna Process and the dynamisc of academic mobility: a comparative approach to Romania and Turkey, *Romanian Journal of Economics*, 2008, p.3.

²⁰ *Ibidem.*

²¹ *Ibidem.*

²² *Ibidem*,p.7.

²³ *Ibidem.*

²⁴ *Ibidem*,pp.11-14.

²⁵ *Ibidem*,p.14.

facing any impediment related to their social and economic background²⁶. Also the social dimension includes and measures the measures which are to be taken by the government in order to help students - especially from socially disadvantaged groups - to cope with the financial and economic characteristics and to provide them with guidance and counselling services having in mind a better access to the mobility programs²⁷. After a series of meetings and seminars, it has been concluded that among the obstacles to mobility, visas and the problems related to social security of both students and staff members, the recognition of their studies abroad and the lack of appropriate financial incentives are some of the most pointed out problems by the Romanian academia²⁸. Besides this, language barrier, the cultural aspects are regarded by many specialists as being an important barrier in student mobility.

In Romania one of the most important outcomes of the accession to the European Union in January 2007 was an enhanced freedom of movement, the national identity cards becoming valid travel documents in all the European Union member states²⁹. This situation was considered as being a huge progress compared to the years before, when receiving a visa was often a big challenge for Romanian students³⁰. There are also a small number of European countries for which a visa is still required, such as the Russian Federation or Ukraine) and the North American countries – another popular destination among the Romanian academia. In the case of the latter, the application for a long term visa can be very complex and time consuming, as well as expensive.

The financial issues are considered to be another important shortcoming of the program, “However, two financial support mechanisms for international mobility may be distinguished in Europe, namely financial support earmarked specifically for mobility and ‘mainstream’ national financial support that is portable. Romania awards financial support specifically for mobility but without any portability of national support. The finance obstacle can be removed by an increasing participation in Tempus, ERASMUS, ERASMUS Mundus, Leonardo Programs and bilateral agreements between countries and higher education institutions³¹”.

Another problem in the implementation of the program is considered to be the language barrier which limits the mobility of most of the students. The Romanian students which are currently studying both in Anglophone and non-Anglophone countries do not seem to have a linguistic problem. “According to a study which was conducted by Open Society Foundation³², it

²⁶ *Ibidem.*

²⁷ *Ibidem.*

²⁸ *Ibidem.*

²⁹ *Ibidem.*

³⁰ *Ibidem.*

³¹ *Ibidem.*

³² COMSA, TUFIS, C., VOICU, B. (2007), Romanian Academic System, Students and teacher’s opinion, OSF, www.osf.ro, *apud* Monica ROMAM, Faima MIZIKACI, Zizi GOSCHIN, The Bologna Process and the dynamism of academic mobility: a comparative approach to Romania and Turkey, *Romanian Journal of Economics*, 2008, p.14.

seems that one third of the students believe that most of their colleagues would have no problem understanding a course in another language, and another third believes that half of their colleagues would be able to deal with such a situation³³”. This study also noticed that the courses which are thought in English are absolutely rare outside the faculties with teaching programs in this language³⁴. “So it is absolutely necessary to introduce more language courses to assist inward mobility, together with increasing provision in English and other widely used European languages³⁵”. Though the above issues represent the series of student mobility obstacles, we should not forget the cultural and attitudinal factors that are standing against mobility, as well as the lack of information and various administrative barriers, which can also hold back mobility.

Overall, the Bologna process has brought a series of fundamental changes for the Romanian Higher Education System on the EHEA framework, which are implemented and monitored through a complex system of mechanisms. We endeavour to present an outlook of these changes by making use of “intellectual capital reporting”³⁶, a system which is not so spread in Romania but which is gaining pre-eminence. We believe that this framework contributes to a more consistent evaluation and further development of the Romanian Higher Education System and would benefit its fully integration to the EHEA. The following section makes a thorough presentation of the concept and of the way in which it contributes to the development of the educational system

Intellectual Capital

The intellectual capital is to be understood as the sum of all knowledge, skills and experience of an organization which are needed in order to maintain its competitiveness and performance; also it represents a mean of communication used by the management of the organization. The fundamental elements of the intellectual capital are the human capital – the people; the structural capital – the resources; and the relational capital – the bonds. A evaluation system based on these pillars is already to be found in the reporting systems of several universities across Europe. Thomas A. Stewart, editor of the “Fortune” magazine is among the first to make an attempt to define and use the concept of intellectual capital, which he defines as “everything that an employee knows in a company and can be used to develop the competitive capacity of the organization”³⁷. It is difficult to make a translation of the business model used to evaluate the

³³ *Ibidem*.

³⁴ Monica ROMAM, Faima MIZIKACI, Zizi GOSCHIN, The Bologna Process and the dynamism of academic mobility: a comparative approach to Romania and Turkey, *Romanian Journal of Economics*, 2008, p.14.

³⁵ *Ibidem*.

³⁶ As it is defined by Thomas A. STEWART in the *Intellectual Capital: The new wealth of organizations*, Nicholas Brealy Publishing, London 1999.

³⁷ Thomas A. STEWART, *op cit*, p.25.

tangible assets of a company to the educational environment, however this strive is deemed worthy of doing it.

The first question to be asked is how the intellectual capital is being created; according to Joseph Schumpeter all the new resources, including knowledge are created through “combination and exchange” as generic processes.³⁸ The process of combination is considered to be the foundation of the economic development in order to “produce means to combine materials and forces within our reach”³⁹. On the other hand, the process of exchange is the prerequisite for the combination of the resources; therefore the intellectual capital is being created by “a process of combining the knowledge and experience of different parties”⁴⁰.

We can speak of two types of intellectual capital, the first one lies in the internal structure of the organization, reflecting concepts, models and systems, this being created by the internal structure of the organization, even though sometimes this system might be imported. The internal structure also includes the organizational culture, the people and both the formal and informal work protocols. The individual skills of the staff reflect their own capacity to behave in specific situations. The major skills to be taken into account are education, experience, native aptitudes, cultural and social values. In this evaluation the people are the only real agents which can be evaluated from an organization. All the activities are them tangible or intangible represent the result of the economic activity of the company. Therefore “the companies do a great effort to value the employees work and to keep them as much as possible in the organization to benefit from their individual competences.”⁴¹.

The external structure of the intellectual capital is represented by the “relations of the company with their consumers and their providers, brands, reputation and the image of the company”⁴². Some of these mechanisms might be in the legal propriety of a company, but the control of the investment in their development still needs to be developed. The components of the external structure are not belonging to the company as the tangible resources do. Their economic value is as intangible as the market value of a house.

The intellectual capital reports are seen as one of the most efficient instruments to evaluate the potential of the academic environment. The Romanian universities and agencies of the Ministry of Education Research Youth and Sport designated by the National Education Act (2011) such as

³⁸Janine NAHAPIET, Sumantra GHOSHAL, “Social Capital, Intellectual Capital, and the Organizational Advantage”, *The Academy of Management Review*, vol.23, No.2, 1998, pp.247-248.

³⁹Joseph A. SCHUMPETER, *The theory of economic development: An inquiry into profits, capital, credit, interest and the business cycle*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1934, p.65.

⁴⁰Janine NAHAPIET, Sumantra GHOSHAL, “Social Capital, Intellectual Capital, and the Organizational Advantage”, *The Academy of Management Review*, vol.23, No.2, 1998, p.248, op.cit.

⁴¹Constantin BRĂTIANU, *A Model of Analysis of the Intellectual and Organizational Capital*, Academia de Studii Economice, Bucuresti, 2006, p.23.

⁴²*Ibidem*, p.23.

the National Council for Statistics and Forecast in Higher Education, National Council for Accreditation of Degrees and University Certificates, National Council for Scientific Research and the Executive Unit for Financing the Higher Education, of the Research and Innovation are holding the largest quantity of data needed to evaluate the intellectual capital of the Romanian Higher Education System. Previous evaluations of the Higher Education Systems include The MERITUM Project (2001), developed by a network of research institutes from Denmark, Finland, France, Spain and Sweden; PRISM (2003), done by universities from Denmark, Ireland, The Netherlands, Spain, Sweden and the United Kingdom; ARC Project (2005) of the Austrian Research Centre; INGENIO (2006) of the Spanish Research Council and the Polytechnic University of Valencia; RICARDIS (2006) done by the Directorate General for Research of the European Commission.

It worth to be mentioned that from 2006 all Austrian universities are required to have intellectual capital reports. „The benefits arise rather from the process itself than from the end result of the performance reporting activity. In particular, the implementation of performance management systems requires communication about performance areas that has not been present before. Thus, it is rather the communication that leads to benefits than the performance information itself”⁴³.

On the long run, each university should be assessed through the means of the intellectual capital reports in order to be able to develop new educational standards, public policies, recommendations on the management of the intellectual capital in a knowledge economy. David Klein and Laurence Prusak are trying to produce a pragmatic image of the intellectual capital in the view of the intellectual capital as “an intellectual material made much formal used to produce a bigger active value”⁴⁴.

Recent reports of the European Commission and of others agencies have shown a growing interest among the universities in developing strategies towards the human capital which is considered to be a fundamental element for achieving the short and medium term goals of the European Union. The Lisbon Research Agenda of the European Commission states that “European universities are not totally prepared to bring their whole contribution for achieving these objectives”⁴⁵. Amir Fazlagic argues that “European universities are characterized by a low rate of innovation, weak bonds with business environment and inadequate politics for human resources”⁴⁶.

⁴³Karl-Heinz LEITNER, “Intellectual Capital Reporting for Universities: Conceptual background and application within the reorganization of Austrian universities”, *In: The Transparent Enterprise. The Value of Intangibles*, Madrid, Spain, 2002, p.10.

⁴⁴Thomas A. STEWART, *Intellectual Capital: The new wealth of organizations*, Nicholas Brealey Publishing, London, 1999, p.47, op.cit.

⁴⁵European Commission, “Mobilizing the Brainpower of Europe: Enabling Universities to make their full contribution to the Lisbon Strategy”, 2005, p.7.

⁴⁶Amir FAZLAGIC, “Measuring the Intellectual Capital of a University.” *In: Trends in the Management of Human Resources in Higher Education*, Poznan University of Economics, Poland, 2005, p.4.

He also stresses that the relationship between the business environment and the universities cannot become stronger unless they reach a common language. The intellectual capital might be regarded as a platform through which both sides will be able to develop a win-win relationship. The models of intellectual capital designed to be implemented for the universities are also implementing elements from the business environment such as the classification of it as: human capital, relational capital and structural capital.

The concerns regarding the implementation of this model to the academic environment are even more justified than it was the case of the business setting more than a decade ago if we take into consideration that the most important resource of the universities is the human capital. Universities “are producers and distributors of knowledge, incorporated in research results, publications and skilled students”⁴⁷.

Concluding remarks

The Bologna Process has a significant impact on the higher education policies in Romania and on the curricula and the structure of the programs developed by the higher education institutions. The influence of the mobility of both students and staff must not be ignored, it continues to have an important effect on the development of the higher education system⁴⁸.

Even in the absence of comprehensive data collection concerning the social dimension of higher education, the information available through the reports of the national and international organizations are providing enough valuable information in order to have a clear image of the phenomenon. Nevertheless the mobility of the Romanian students is seeing a new dimension which was not seen before; more students are enrolling in exchange programs, a trend which began in the past few years⁴⁹.

⁴⁷Karl-Heinz LEITNER, “Intellectual Capital Reporting for Universities: Conceptual background and application within the reorganization of Austrian universities”, *In: The Transparent Enterprise. The Value of Intangibles*, Madrid, Spain, 2002, p.10, op.cit.

⁴⁸ Monica ROMAM, Faima MIZIKACI, Zizi GOSCHIN, The Bologna Process and the dynamism of academic mobility: a comparative approach to Romania and Turkey, *Romanian Journal of Economics*, 2008, p.16.

⁴⁹ *Ibidem*.

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