

EUROPEAN EDUCATION: EFFICIENCY OR QUALITY?

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***Abstract.** The main aim of the study is to analyze the general background with a view to searching for models of good practice and potential solutions, not only as regards higher education in Romania and in Europe in general, but mainly as far as the foreign language education is concerned. A historical perspective is always necessary and useful in such an anticipatory analysis; this is completed by a brief revisit of various viewpoints in the field of education in other countries of Europe, as well as of the international educational policy documents establishing lines of growth up to 2025. Both positive aspects and potential drawbacks are approached in a realistic manner, taking into consideration the rather troubled profile of a future and a time horizon that are getting quite close.*

***Key words:** higher education prospects, efficiency, quality, anticipatory analysis*

1. General background – analysis, questions, concerns

After 2007, Romania became a Member State of the European Union. This new capacity has been conducive to the need to face new higher demands and standards – educationwise – that the country has to assume and adapt to the specific conditions that have emerged after 1989. Certainly, such concerns existed in the previous years as well, as the members of the professional educational environment – researchers, teachers, managers, curriculum and law makers – have for long been interested in identifying the best paths for the future.

One can exemplify in this respect with reference to the main questions that the British Council in Germany [2006] put on the meeting agenda

for a detailed investigation. The quoted document is focused on the modalities in which the teaching of modern languages can – and should prepare – the learner for the ‘work world’, on condition that the teachers themselves should be prepared and able to ensure this form of training optimally. During the meeting a range of questions emerged – they are, we believe, as many points of interest to which answers must be given, including by the Romanian educational system.

Of the numerous key issues that the actors of the present raise when facing the future of the linguistic environment of the beginning of the 21st century, some are worth mentioning: manners of implementing learning based on *competences*; ways of modifying the *teaching methods* in order to prepare our learners to be able to cope with the need for *mobility on the job market*; defining the *quality standards* that are needed in the initial training of young teachers; possibilities of maximizing the *life long learning* opportunities so as to ensure a permanent refreshing of the knowledge and competences of the teachers currently in activity; *patterns of evaluation* of the learners’ skills in the current phase in the higher education, a.s.o.

In our effort to provide a diagnosis of the current stage conditions and requirements, to design the optimizing routes, we should start using both as a guide and, especially, as a standard of quality, the documents/framework which include the commitment of the 29 signatory states, by their ministers of education, to apply the reform onto their educational systems in a coherent convergent manner [The Bologna Declaration, 2000]. The so-called **Bologna process** is by no means a path leading to uniformity. According to the text of the signed document, the fundamental principles of *autonomy* and *respect for diversity* would be observed. The value of this document is that, despite the natural differences, the European educational systems do face internal and external challenges regarding: the development and diversification of higher education, the possibilities offered to the graduates, the weaknesses in the sphere of key areas skills, the enlargement of the private or transnational educational institutions etc. In this respect, we should emphasize the merit of the Declaration to admit the value of coordinating reforms and creating compatible educational systems, as a coherent European response to the existing common problems. Thus the Bologna Declaration becomes not only a political document, but also a reforming action plan.

As shown in an official document [The Confederation of EU Rectors' Conferences and the Association of European Universities (CRE), 2000], the main features of this action plan are as follows: a well-defined aim, viz. creating a European space for higher education meant for increasing the mobility and employment possibilities of citizens, as well as the increase of international competitiveness of higher education on our continent; a deadline, set for 2010, standing for the closing of the decade of reforms; clear objectives of the program, aiming to adopt a common framework of university degrees and diplomas, the introduction of the three levels – bachelor, master, doctoral – in all the systems, with an appropriate corresponding system relevant for the job market, the use of compatible credit systems, covering learning forms of the life long type, implementing a new European dimension in ensuring quality, by compatible criteria and methods, removing obstacles still existing in the free mobility of the students/teachers/researchers and managers in higher education. The Bologna materials do not neglect to mention the fact that, by the integration in the European Union of new members (among them – Romania), this reality gets wider dimensions.

Throughout the post-Bologna period of time, there were substantial changes everywhere in Europe. The harmonization of the key-themes of the educational modifications being made on our continent was clarified and refined. As stated regarding the Bologna process consequences [Barloy, 2005], new key-themes were added by means of the Declaration in Prague: answering to the requirements of permanent education; involving higher education organizations and the students in the process; promoting the European education attractiveness throughout the world; implementing quality evaluation policies in each country in order to ensure the mutual confidence indispensable for the validation of the studies carried out in another country.

With reference to the main themes of the Bologna process, its 'global' character is emphasized [Cristea, 2005], viz. in relationship with the general values specific to the informational society, in which Europe must reduce the difference still existing between the old continent and the USA and other zones on the planet. Similarly, its 'open' character is underlined – the importance of observing diversity of the cultural type is reasserted. Such a type of project is characterized by the transfer of

priorities between the time required for the formal education issues, that must be diminished and turn essential, versus the time required for the non-formal education elements, which should be extended, respectively.

2. Looking for solutions – from past to present and future

At this stage it becomes evident that the educational world and its stakeholders should attempt to fully understand the current profile of the national system, a concern that is valid for Romania to the same extent, to identify the problems and anticipate the areas of challenge.

Ever since the last years of the 20th century, specialists in higher education worldwide [World Conference on higher education for the 21st century, 1998] have channeled their interests towards: serving the "unprecedented demand for and the great diversification" in higher education, together with admitting its paramount role for the general sociocultural and economic development. The new generations should be provided with "new skills, knowledge and ideals".

In countries with long-lasting traditions in the domain of higher education development, such as Britain, this interest has been permanent [Universities UK Efficiency and Modernisation Task Group, 2011]. Their concern goes to identifying "innovative approaches to efficiency", conducive to an enhancement of the effectiveness of the higher education institutions products.

Similarly, at continent level [Summary Of Answers From The Eurydice Network Anticipatory Project To Investigate Teachers' Initial And Continuing Training Needs (Opepro), 2010] the focus is placed on *teacher training* needs – both on the quantitative plan, as well as on the qualitative one, as an important part of the general educational strategy.

But what is our country's response to this trend of prepared anticipation? Romanian specialized organisms seem to have understood their role, therefore they have embarked upon drawing up a vision and strategy set of documents for the Romanian higher education, aiming as far as the time horizon 2025 – it is not so far away actually, only 12 years separate us from that apparently remote date!

The first significant step in this process was the Strategy of the Romanian higher education for the period 2002 – 2010 [MEC, 1999]. Its main role was to schedule the stages of the Romanian route, but also to:

(i) formulate the essential principles in the reorganization of the system, characterized by a “new philosophy of learning”, increase the status and force of scientific research and correlate education with the labour market;

(ii) anticipate a range of real critical issues – in complementarity with the former aspects, e.g. the complexity of the didactic process in the higher education, where some maintain that the student no longer needs the teacher, due to the progress of the modern communication means, while it is a matter of wide recognition that it is by the direct relationship between the student and the teacher that the communication of knowledge and the shaping up of the skills can be best transmitted.

There are a series of proposed solutions: the modularity of the university courses; a new core consisting of the relative autonomy of the course/module author/teacher; the initiation and development of e-learning type educational policies.

In general our educational policies will be compatible with the rest of the European ones as far as the following are concerned:

- ensuring equal chances for all;
- ensuring higher education mobility and the European dimension of education.

More precisely, as far as we are interested in the policy regarding *foreign languages education*, it is reassuring to note that it is given an exceptionally important role. Thus, the Romanian law makers [Legea nr. 288 privind organizarea studiilor universitare, 2004] rigorously stipulated the role of knowledge of foreign languages against the context of the country’s integration in the EU.

General knowledge permits scientific approaches to the domain, meant to ensure the understanding, innovation and creation of new knowledge, as well as the oral and written communication proper in the occupational domain and in various cultural contexts – op.cit – Art.6, indent.2.

Also the general competences refer to: the use of various modes of written and oral communication, including in a foreign language and assuming responsibility in elaborating a personal program of self improvement – op. cit. – Art.6, indent.4.

The next two stages in the reshaping of the Romanian higher education strategy were the logical consistent follow ups to the incipient

viewpoints – [the White Book, 2011] and [PROCESUL ELABORARII DOCUMENTULUI DE VIZIUNE SI A STRATEGIEI PENTRU INVATAMANTUL SUPERIOR ROMANESC LA ORIZONTUL DE TIMP 2025, 2011].

In a nutshell, the White Book, covering an average time period of 5 years (2011 – 2015), advances a set of concrete transformation measures that can be immediately implemented, condensing the experience acquired so far by the experts in the field. It is the result of sustained dialogues with the main actors of the educational system, which certifies its long term validity and high quality.

The latter document focuses on the understanding of the current stage of the Romanian education, the identification of problems and anticipation of challenges.

Finally, an invitation to look into the future together is made in the last document we analyze [Viziune – Invatamantul superior din Romania din 2025, 2011]. It is mostly an invitation to all the members of the domain to act in a harmonious manner, together – as an act of trust in our creativity resources and adaptability, while undergoing a process of change ourselves.

It is of course mandatory to anticipate potential latent conflictual situations, inertial risks and so on. A lot can be learned from the positive experiences of our European partners in handling such drawbacks.

An important problem is the *pressure of time* – the time required in order to optimize the impact of the structural change of the curriculum and of the new training methodologies.

There is a certain resistance [Padure, 2006] of some EU member states towards *standardization*, particularly in education. This may affect the level of creativity specific to a real academic freedom in diversity.

The implementation of the *principles of quality* is an essential element of the higher education destiny, as well, as pointed out in the literature [Freed et. al., 1997]. These should be approached coherently, in a systematic manner. The *holistic* aspect becomes a priority, in order to create ”culture of academic excellency” in universities, which has good chances to render these institutions more efficient.

One can find the main directions that are positively influenced by applying the full quality management in the academe [Dheeraj, 2000]:

- redefining the role, aim and responsibilities of higher education units;
- improving the school as a "way of living";
- planning the teacher training at all managerial levels;
- shaping up teaching staff characterized by attitude models and convictions oriented towards qualitative development;
- using the data provided by research and the practical activity in guiding both the adopted strategy and the practice connected with it.

Other researchers also emphasize the necessary systemic character required in order to generate improvement within an organization [Jenkins, 2003]. Teachers should act as correlated teams – in reality, though, things may look a bit less ideal: nothing is linear, foreseeable or typical. There are factors that can bar the ascending process [Wolverton, 1994]:

- a) standardization* – can be applicable more easily to business organizations than to the higher education humanistic institutions – including foreign languages here;
- b) the difficulty* to be both in full process of change while also preserving a top position as a successful higher education unit;
- c) creating teams* to multiply the qualitative effects of the change rapidly, as it is a time consuming process.

If we draw a conclusion at this stage, we can note the essential elements that the Romanian answer must face in anticipating a future that is getting closer and closer:

- the implementation of the main principles in the system reorganization, characterized by a new learning philosophy;
- the optimization of scientific research at university level and the implementation of results in the didactic process;
- a better correlation of higher education with the work force market,
- the anticipation of a range of real problems and advancing solutions to solve them out.

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