

TOWARDS AN INTEGRATED PROJECT: HIGHER EDUCATION AND GRADUATE EMPLOYMENT IN ROMANIA

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ABSTRACT: The expansion of higher education in Romania in the recent years has produced an increase in the number of graduates entering the workplace, along with a growing concern about the mismatches between the slightly increasing demands for qualified labour and the rapidly growing number of higher education graduates. Pessimistic scenarios of “over education” or “Academic proletariat” have fueled the interest in identifying foreseeable problems and finding possible solutions, several studies subsequently focusing on the impact of vocational curricular approaches on the diversification on employment prospects according to fields of study. Our paper articulates a brief environmental scan of Romanian HE and describes the context(s) that, in our view, are (or have been) producing the pressures for more room or change in the attempt of HE institutions to meet the demands of the market economy. We argue for the dire need to correlate institutional research to a larger scale (inter)national survey so as to not only produce evidence of and explanation for different degrees of success or failure in preparing Romanian students for professional life but also to formulate future national educational policies aligned to the European demands of the labour market.

Key words: Competencies, labour market, work assignments, skills, employment, educational path

1. GENERAL BACKGROUND

Most theories of development, assessment, and intervention strategies within present day career counseling research have been constructed within the capitalist structure of the late-20th-century labour force in the United States. The focus rests on person--environment fit, human development, and social learning as the foundation for Western models of career formation and counseling interventions. However, according to Chung (2003), these theories incorporate the values and views of the modern industrial era and are established on a hierarchical model characteristic of large organizations in the United States in the past century. Osipow and Fitzgerald, as early as 1996, noted that the question of career development in other cultures was ignored whereas Guidon and Richmond (2005) expressed their concern that "What we have not learned enough about is career work ... with people whose cultural experience is vastly different from that of first-world nations".

2. THE IMPACT OF GOVERNMENT ON EDUCATIONAL AND CAREER CHOICES

In Romania, during the socialist regime up to 1989, the plan for industrialization identified the working class as the ruling force, requiring a rigid outline that nominated the number of workers needed in each sector of the work environment. The educational focus was on expanding the working class, and the slots open in the educational system reflected this strategy. In other words, the profiles and number of career specializations were regulated by a

governmental plan outlining the need and availability of job opportunities. Whereas in Western countries educational and career choices are only minimally influenced by the policy, according to Pinguart et al. (2004), the government of the former East European communist countries intruded upon individual career choices to a large extent, in what was to be called "the governmental regimentation of access to the highest school track".

In Romania (of the 1970s and 1980s), education was mandatory up to the 10th grade and free of charge for the entire length of study. However, the number of high school graduates accepted into colleges or universities was severely restricted. According to the U.S. Library of Congress Study of Romania (Bachman, 1989), only 8% of these graduates were permitted to enroll into the highest educational track. The very same statistics (8%) apply to their East German peers, whereas in West Germany, 23% of late adolescents were accepted into colleges (Pinguart et al., 2004). In the Soviet Union in the 1950s, roughly 80% of the children finishing secondary school enrolled in an institute of higher education; in the late 1970s, the figure was not more than 18% (Heller, 1988).

3. OCCUPATIONAL CHOICES

During communism, unemployment in Romania was to be eradicated and every high school or college graduate was to be guaranteed a job, hence the central government allocated slots based on predicted demand for given occupations. As a result of this restricted opportunity for admissions,

competition became very intense at an early age, so much so that career choice and decisions were pushed to the age of 16, or sometimes even as early as 14 (Bachman, 1989). With this early age in career decision making, it is not surprising that the family came to have a strong influence on career orientation and students' educational trajectory was determined mostly by concerns about job assignments, geographical location, and anticipated working assignments and conditions. Upon completion of one's educational program, an individual could not apply for a job of his or her choice rather the individual was assigned a job through a yearly state-coordinated distribution system. The Ministry of Education would organize long summer sessions of graduate distribution, according to specializations and fields of study, which practically forced the graduates to work in geographical regions far away from their families or birthplace. The range of career choices was restricted and reduced by the undesirability of some of their assignments and had a very limited field of action in the socialist Romania (Ioanid, 2000; Ludusan, 2003), however there were a few advantages to the system: a) a departure from the "common gender stereotypes of career choice" (Whitmarsh & Ritter, 2007); these were the times when higher numbers of college admission slots and greater opportunities for large city assignments made engineering an especially attractive field of studies in the 1980s, and when many female students took advantage of the educational slots available in electronics, construction, heavy machinery, or metallurgic engineering.; b) free access to health care and education, welcomed by all citizens and c) a guaranteed employment and pension system, by means of which the Communist system offered the undisputed advantage of protection security. Ironically, this protection security which was in fact the only instrumental freedom familiar to Romanian citizens, was fractured by the overturn of the Communist regime.

Curriculum-wise, prior to 1989, the university curricular content placed a strong emphasis on theoretical knowledge and focused more on transmission and reproduction of a large quantity of knowledge while minimizing the value of practical applications within the educational experience. The highly specialized college curriculum carried the informational load of a combined bachelor's- and master's-levels education (Ludusan 2003), which sufficiently equipped graduates with theoretical knowledge however, the educational system failed to offer the experiential tools needed for the practical

integration of that knowledge. With such a lack of practical experience, graduates faced a great disadvantage when they attempted to "translate" these studies to Western educational standards and practices. With the downfall of the Communist regime and abrupt opening of opportunities to work and study abroad, the necessity to establish an international curriculum of university studies emerged with unprecedented power (Ludusan, 2003) along with a new paradigm shift in learning, that is passing from reproductive to problem-solving education and formative evaluation.

4. THE NEW ERA

This was basically the heritage that all educational policies tried to change in view of preparing graduates for the tough(er), by all means, different emerging labour market of the 1990s. Apart from the difficulties, hesitations and delays during the 20 years of transition, Romania has, to a large extent, undertaken reform in all spheres: economically, politically, and socially. While the first 10 years were characterized by the restructuring of the economy (accelerated in 1997-1999), which suffered several crisis periods, a re-launching process was started in 2000 (Bocean 2007). Macro-economic equilibrium, budget deficit, and the level of inflation have all been improved, along with a better coordination of budgetary and monetary policies. Restructuring has been gradually broadened to affect sensitive sectors and the privatization process accelerated considerably and is now more advanced.

Since 2000, the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) has registered a steady growth: 2.1% in 2000, 5.7% in 2001, 5.1% in 2002, 5.2% in 2003, 8.3% in 2004, and 4.2% in 2005 and for 2006 the value envisaged is 4.5%. After being at an excessively high level, average inflation has been on a constant downward trend: from 40.7% in 2000 to 8.5% in 2005 and 6.5% for 2006. (Bocean, 2007).

In the last four years, the development of the private sector has emerged in industry and services. The new private sector has reached a size enabling a sustainable decrease of unemployment and compensating for the job losses in the public sector. There has been an average development of small enterprises, which are the main source of job growth - in particular in services - all of which has pointed to a certain confidence in the business environment. However, at present, due to the economic crisis, employment and labour participation rates are constantly declining, Romania being characterized by the existence of a dual labour market with agriculture and migration playing a buffer role for

the employment losses in the restructuring process of the industry (Bocean 2007). In the context of all efforts geared towards diminishing the size of the hidden dimension of both over-employment and unemployment, the role of the universities is increasing in the manpower demand and supply, returns on educational investments and patterns of occupational mobility.

5. MISMATCHES BETWEEN DEMANDS FOR QUALIFIED LABOUR AND NUMBER OF GRADUATES

The expansion of higher education in Romania in the recent years has produced an increase in the number of graduates entering the workplace, along with a growing concern about the mismatches between the slightly increasing demands for qualified labour and the rapidly growing number of higher education graduates. Pessimistic scenarios of "over education" or "Academic proletariat" have fueled the interest in identifying foreseeable problems and finding possible solutions, several studies subsequently focusing on the impact of vocational curricular approaches on the diversification on employment prospects according to fields of study. To quote an example, more than 200,000 graduates were launched on the job market last fall, half of whom graduated from faculties of Economics, Law, Medicine and Pharmacy, IT and Engineering. But the national job supply for these majors was last year some 4,500, which represents a ratio of over 20 applicants for one job (qtd in Iloviceanu 2009). The number of young people who opted for fields of economics and law has risen exponentially in the past few years. If about 2,000 economists and 300 lawyers graduated in 1990, at present, figures amount to almost 30,000 economists and 9,000 law graduates, respectively. It is obvious that graduate employment is being presently challenged to the core and two of the most frequently invoked underlying reasons are unadjusted curricula to job market demands, and graduate skills' failure to meet employers' requirements.

To prove the last point, a 2008 study conducted by Manpower Inc., a world leader in the employment services industry (as qtd in Romania News Watch article 2008), entitled "Talent Shortage Survey 2008: Global Results" and which compares the situation in 32 countries, finds that Romanian businesses face the greatest difficulty worldwide in finding qualified personnel to meet their requirements and as many as 73% of employers reported difficulties in filling available positions, compared to 12% in the UK,

18% in Italy, 26% in Belgium, 31% in France, 34% in Germany, 47% in Greece and 49% in Poland. For other continents the figures range from 12% in India to 22% for the USA, or 28% for Mexico and 38% for South Africa.

At the other end of the segment, contrarywise, the evolution of the national labour force is illustrated by the more discouraging long-term demographic prospects according to which this present inflation in the wave of graduates will diminish shortly and the available labour resources will decrease due to the population ageing and low income (Vasile 2004). In this respect, the NIS forecast concerning the labour resources evolution shows, within the 2025 horizon, small contingents, in all smaller by less than 10 percent, but causing major structural changes: a diminution by almost one-third in the young groups and an increase in the contingents of the elderly by over 140 percent (NIS 2002 data). The demographic diminution affects the labour supply, but additionally, the young highly skilled contingents with a higher working potential "are vanishing" from the national labour market by migratory labour outflows. Such societal losses cause imbalances in the national labour market and diminish Romania's competitiveness in the international and EU markets as a result of the following factors (Vasile 2004):

a) There is a diminution in the working potential caused by a lower living standard than that in the Western European countries (high technology, immigration, brain drain/gain, etc.).

b) The national labour market cannot retain the required labour force through its attributes, at a disadvantage from the EU market which offers at least higher incomes. Likewise, excessive labor market regulations, aging and (inadequate) education outcomes jointly contribute to low labor force participation rates, long-term unemployment and limited movement of labor across different sectors (World Bank Report 2008).

c) There is not yet a fully shaped, integrated work culture to work both ways and to cope with the new labour market context, in that the graduates' required skills are maximally self preserved instead of adjusted to the more efficient Western pattern (World Bank Report 2005), being in other words, very flexible/adaptable to the jobs abroad, and way too conservative in the national labour market.

To all this, the modernization of industry and services along with the introduction of modern production techniques and better human resources management have begun to determine a growth of productivity (Bocean et al, 2008), in a rate that will

be positive, yet lower than the rate of economic growth (4-6%). Along this line, possible job displacement effects of new technology, computer equipment and computer assisted production lines as well as other measures introduced to lift productivity have led to growing concerns about government policy changes that seek to enhance productivity, but will nonetheless determine a reduction of employment rate.

6. THE RENEGOTIATION OF THE SOCIAL ROLE OF UNIVERSITIES

In this economic picture, compounded by the reality of harsh recessive crisis, it has become clear that the role played by the universities in supplying and training the labour force has become critical, and hence recent debates on the relationship between higher education and employment can no longer be characterized one-sidedly, rather, many issues are being concomitantly raised in the context: the globalization and Europeanization of the economy and society, declining transparency and continuity of careers, the increasing role of vocational guidance and professional re-training, the increasing speed of knowledge transfer required in jobs, the dramatic structural changes of the labour force as a result of the introduction of new technologies and new managerial concepts, the “massification” of higher education, increasing unemployment, etc. Likewise, there has been a growing need to reconsider the importance and long-term strategies of Romanian universities in their relationship with the national and European labour markets, necessity which has arisen as a result of the following factors:

a) Despite the efforts undertaken in the educational policy of the last decade (established by the integrating directives of the National Reform Plan 2007-2010), aimed at harmonizing the quantitative demand and supply of „highly qualified” labour through planning, information or political campaigning, it has become clear that the mismatches have become widespread, even endemic. Both the instrumental ambitions of students and their intrinsic motives regarding enrichment through knowledge and reflection have led to an increase in their enrolment in higher education beyond expected demand from traditional areas of graduate employment.

b) The economic transition of the first decade of the 21st century (elaborated according to the National Development Plan 2007-2013 and aligned to the Cohesion Policy of the EU, based on the priorities and stipulated by the Lisbon Agenda and goals of the Goteborg Meeting) has been severely affected in

the last year by the economic crisis and a decline in provisions of paid work due to scarcity, rationalization and use of new technologies.

c) Higher education institutions and students are expected to be ever more responsive in their studies and activities performed to the needs of the employment system. However, these necessities tend to be more difficult to identify in times of economic uncertainty, substantial mismatches and considerable erosion of traditional jobs and work conditions.

d) Higher education institutions have been held ever more accountable in the last years for the utility of education and research for the benefit of economy and society. However, the criteria for their assessment in this respect are uncertain, particularly because the research on the substance, teaching-learning processes and their impact on employment and work have been more successful in demystifying traditional concepts than in establishing a generally accepted knowledge of „good practices”, „quality”, etc.

e) In the process of growing European cooperation, as well as of growing internationalization and globalization of tertiary education systems and graduate labour markets, the differences among European countries regarding required competencies in work and employment settings might turn out to be both a barrier and an asset to mobility and cooperation (ECESADLR 2002, 2005, 2006).

In this respect, latest debates, particularly those published by the Commission of the European Communities on the future of higher education (Integrated Guidelines for Jobs and Growth 2005-2008/Luxemburg-16.09.05/CEC 2005a,b,c,d) have clearly underscored the existing tensions between the high expectations and hopes of an increasing number of graduates on the one hand, and the alarming concerns about unemployment, inequality and precarious labour conditions in the European context, on the other; these have been established and adopted as national directions for further increase of responsibility, responsiveness, creativity, flexibility and social skills of graduates. In the studies „From Higher Education to Employment” (OECD, 2003a, 2005a, 2005d and 2006a), the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development has analyzed the potential and weak points between the world of work and higher education on the basis of available large-scale surveys and statistics and has indicated the need to identify newly emerging occupations, new skills, qualifications and changes in the occupational structure of Central and South Eastern European

countries. Which brings us to the next important question: of what we have so far done and what else should we do?

The theoretical concepts and controversies in recent research on the success of higher education beyond classroom are well looked into and documented by Teichler (2002), Psacharopoulos (1987), Goetschy (2002), and Carnoy (1995) and are focused on the regulatory power of the market versus the need for infrastructural planning (Teichler 2002), on the „custodial function” of education (Kellermann, 1990 and Lancaster, 1990) on the justification and fallacy of measuring social rates of return, the productive and screening /filter function of education (Karabel and Halsey 1997 and Carnoy 1995), on the opportunities of social mobility versus the reproductive and “status distributive”function of (Teichler, 1996), particularly, on the impact of credentials on careers and professional policies, etc. In Romania, the contributions of Ghinararu C (2007), Burlea and Bocean (2005), Voicu (2005) and Pauna et Earle (1998), N. Rodriguez Planas (2007) and Rodriguez Planas et J. Benus (2007) have thoroughly examined the stages and issues of the transitional economy and formulated several directives for future policies, however, we argue that in the absence of any coherent national data on at least one generation of graduates, clear means of involvement and commitment to the European labour market have still remained a desideratum, achievable only on a conceptual level. The lack of a large-scale survey, able to provide not only structural information (number of graduates, fields of study, employment status, etc) but also precise information about graduates’ competencies, the nature of work tasks and their use of competencies in a work place, is creating an informational hiatus on a complex assessment of our current status.

Similar projects have already been conducted in Europe within the CHEERS network (careers after graduation- an European research study) by Harald Schomburg and Ulrich Teichler, who have undertaken and coordinated at the University of Kassel a study which examined the extent to which the relationship between higher education and the world of work are similar or different among Western European countries. In their analysis of the degree of employment and work of graduates from institutions of higher education, 12 European countries participated (Austria, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain, Sweden, United Kingdom, Norway) of the former communist European countries, only the Czech Republic being included as a participant. Because Romania adhered

to the European Union only later, in January, 2007, we argue that such a study is not only needed at a national level, rather, it has become critical to the European assessment of the way in which the economic transition process determines graduates’ subsequent careers and their competencies relate to work assignments.

Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu has already initiated several steps aimed at improving the capacity of our higher education institution to provide relevant qualifications for the labour market demands. Here, several studies have already been conducted to explore the common and different elements established between various fields of study and occupational areas across the Transylvanian region, studies that analyze such variables related to equality, the role of educational levels, the demand for specialized or general competencies, the social diagnosis of work, as well as the growing role of regional mobility and diversity in our region. But this is not enough. We need to look more into the extent to which socio-biographic backgrounds, educational experiences and achievements as well as the transitional process can determine and/or influence the choice and pursuit of career, along with an examination of the interconnectedness between various types of competence and available work assignments. We have adjusted our curricula, we strengthened the relationships with the Regional Labour Office, we are counselling our graduates, assist them in finding a job and we are maintaining close contact with our graduates. Unfortunately, these singular attempts have not been targeted but incidentally on such larger current critical issues in the success of tertiary education beyond classroom: the role played by social competencies (affective and motivational) in the pursuit of a career, the structural and curricular diversity in higher education and the graduates’ options, the demand for specialized or/and general competencies, recent changes on the labour market, transition in employment and career, the growing role and impact of (inter) national/ regional mobility and diversity, etc. The so far disparate and disconnected researches call for a national, by all means integrated European, interdisciplinary approach to include elements of „added value” in Romanian higher education and to similarly examine globally the interconnectedness between the competencies needed on the labour market on the one hand, and those provided by the higher education institutions, on the other; the degree of job occupancy, the graduates’ degree of adaptability and flexibility in their early career, and last but not least, the regional, national-specific

and/or European of employment. By means of an integrated and (inter)national large scale survey, educational paths can be identified retrospectively, and graduates' trajectories can be better examined over a substantial period of their life-course, along with the inner dynamics and the relative autonomy of the transition process, in other words, such a large-scale survey will provide information on the extent to which job search, transitory employment and unemployment etc.(on the part of the graduates) guidance, counselling and assistance in job search (on the part of higher education institutions and employment agencies) as well as recruitment policies (on the part of the employers) can, may or will shape the graduates' early career stages.

7. CONCLUSIONS

The findings of this integrated research will be all the more important as they will produce evidence of and explanation for different degrees of success or failure in preparing Romanian students for professional life. We anticipate that the results will further evidence the importance of trans-regional cooperation and communication in graduates' work assignments, particularly, the necessity that the links between higher education and the world of work be more clearly viewed as an interdisciplinary pattern of learning, socialization and coping with professional tasks than in the past when the often great attention was paid to the use of field-specific knowledge. Such research will set the final national assessment in a European context, side by side with the 12 European countries which generated similar surveys in 2000 and 2004 (from which Romania was missing) and will draw the attention of the educational factors within national and global trends of convergence towards a "knowledge-based society".

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