

## THE USE OF MISSION STATEMENT AND OBJECTIVES IN UNIVERSITIES

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*The present study is an analysis of the mission statements and the objectives belonging to a significant sample of the Romanian public universities in 2009. The analysis focuses on the formal and main aspects, without aiming at identifying a relationship with the state or the performances of the respective organizations. The information was gathered by means of the official websites.*

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### **1. Introduction**

After 1990, the number of Romanian universities has increased rapidly, due to the significant changes within the socio-political and economical environment. A part of the existing universities divided on specialization criteria. In parallel, other newly constituted universities appeared, either established on the basis offered by small organizations of higher education which had been in stagnation or extinction before 1990, or founded using no previous basis. After almost two decades, in Romania there are more than 50 public universities and more than 100 certified universities, including publicly and privately-funded organizations.

The explosion in the number of the universities shows certain dramatic changes in the demand and offer of higher education and also significant changes regarding their competitive behavior and managerial mechanisms. The changes in the economic environment have induced an increase in the demand of enlarged university competences, which traditionally have been neglected during the communist period. This phenomenon materialized also in the growth of the number of students who aimed at different types of university degrees and training that had as a result the emergence of a great number of privately funded education institutions besides new public universities and the development of the existing ones. The interest taken within higher education has been enhanced by the reorganization of the Romanian economy and the general economic growth that Romania has experienced in the past two decades. Even in the terms of circumstances favorable to the demand, the rapid increase in the number of universities generated the essential conditions necessary for the development of a competitive environment related to the university offer. The changes associated with the socio-political and economic aspects of the society encouraged the appearance of many regulations which emphasized the competitive character of the offer.

The things that have happened in Romania for the past twenty years reflect a global tendency of increased competition amongst higher education institutions across various academic systems. In these conditions, the universities adopt behaviors similar to the companies which operate on free competitive markets, and apply some of their management tools. From the panoply of the strategic tools that a company uses, universities have chosen the strategic plan, the mission and objectives statement. As these tools, despite their usefulness, have implied also a considerable consumption of resources, a critical evaluation of these processes and their impact on the organizational performance becomes the purpose of this analysis. The evaluation from the point of view related to the effects on performance implies a great number of aspects that are debatable even at the level of the basic theory. As a consequence, the discussion about mission and objectives is focused only of the formal aspects, presuming the accomplishment of certain formal conditions would have positive consequences on the results.

## **2. Mission and objectives as management tools**

The mission statement and the formalization of the strategic objectives related to a certain organization represent an instrumental dyad of management which seemed to gain popularity during the last decades. Even if there is no objective relation that implies the simultaneous and correlated utilization of both elements, the practice shows the managers' preference for such specific use. Due to their nature and role, the formalization of the mission is more transparent than the one dealing with the system of objectives. In general, that is why one can easier appreciate the quality belonging to the mission statement than the one belonging to the manner in which the system of objectives is materialized. One may suppose that, for the public organizations belonging to the university, there is an advanced transparency inclusive of its objectives.

In the case of profit-seeking organizations, the mission statement appears to be utilized by most of the companies surveyed, e.g. 90% of 500 companies surveyed by Bart and Baetz (1998), or 94% from the ones that use strategic tools in a study of Rigby (1994). The certifications related to the management of quality, and also the „democratization” of the companies in the sense of accountability growth referred to an increasing number of stakeholders that create an institutionalized pressure in order to carry out a mission statement.

The numerous studies that deal with the formal aspects related to the mission statements classify and place in hierarchical order the different elements included in the statement. A more reduced number of studies are focused on the relation between performance and mission statement. For instance, Collins and Porras (1995) suggest that the best performing firms have boast clear mission and objectives. On the other hand, there are also studies, as the one belonging to Bart (1997), which offers a different perspective of the topic. „The overall conclusion is that, in any sample of mission statements, the vast majority are not worth the paper they are written on and should not be taken with any degree of seriousness” Bart states after researching the topic in North America. It's obvious that the situation becomes more complex in the case of public organizations, due to issues such as institutional or organizational efficiency.

The use of the objectives in management was theorized by Drucker (1954, 1957) and applied further by Bacanu (2007). Drucker is also at the origin of the set of criteria that define a “well expressed” objective, a set known under the acronym SMART, meaning that objectives need to be specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and time-related). Even if in practice the management by objectives (MBO) diffused rapidly during the sixties and the seventies, certain studies, e.g. Schuster and Kindall (1974), showed that the method is applied correctly and with significant results only in 10 companies from the Top Fortune 500 even if it is estimated that more than 80% of the American companies were using at that moment. Finally, Drucker launches an interesting estimation dealing with the use of objectives in management. During the nineties, he estimates retrospectively that MBO is nothing but a simple tool, along with the others belonging to the panoply of the management techniques, and that its application depends on the existence of certain objectives, or, as the parent of MBO points out, in the most of the cases these objectives do not exist.

Presuming that the formalization of the mission and the accomplishment of certain objectives have positive results related to the organization performances, their use has extended even in the case of public organizations - universities included - especially in the English-speaking area of management within USA and Great Britain. However, there are no consistent studies to relate the use of these instruments to the top positions of the American and British universities.

Accepting that the relation mission-performance works also for the universities on the one hand, and being pressed by the emergence of a competitive environment for the university offer in Romania of 90's, on the other hand, the top officials that managed the policy of the Romanian higher education considered as a necessary measure to introduce certain regulations with direct effects on the discussed topic. Their idea was to motivate the public universities to explain the way they would act, in order to utilize the public resources allocated by the ministry of education.

The explanation presumed a mission statement and the definition of a certain set of objectives which would represent the basic elements of a strategic plan. In these terms, due to a ministry regulation, the public universities, which expected a budget allocation to support the educational process for a part of the students, were pressed to formalize a four to five years plan. On whose basis a so called „institutional contract” was signed between the ministry and the university as a provider of educational services.

This regulation was issued in 1998. It contains general recommendations dealing with the structure of the strategic plan. Between them, there are several elements related to the mission and to the objectives of the organization. For the mission statement a clear formulation is suggested, in order to emphasize the distinct characteristics of the university. The accomplishment of a prediction is discussed for its goals and objectives, dealing with the evolution of certain major components of the activity, with the specialization portfolio included. Detailed explanations dealing with the reason of this class are offered by Bratianu and Leter (2001). In parallel with the administrative action, there was a series of programs related to the training of the universities top staff, programs developed by the Western partners and supported by PHARE funds.

Together with the accomplishment of these strategic plans the university charters were also updated in the matter of the organization mission. A great number of universities have periodically updated their own charter, but in 2009 it is difficult to clear out, using the methodology of this study, if the mission statement from this official document was updated too. However, several months after the appearance of the ministry disposition, all universities had a formalized strategic plan which took into account the mentioned formal suggestions. Due to the fact that no problems were pointed out in the process of negotiation related to the institutional contracts between the ministry and every public university, one can assume that the strategic plans which supported the negotiation were found acceptable, inclusive to the level of the mission statement and of the objectives.

The effects of the formalization related to the mission and to the objectives of the universities were significantly estimated according to the pattern of the structural studies dealing with the companies. In a different way, one cannot specify the possibility of knowing and assuming the mission and the objectives by the members of the university community, especially by the teaching staff. One cannot state anything about the positive change of the stakeholders' behavior or of the general performances of the university (but what is actually the relevant performance?). The things go the same in the case of more sophisticated elements, as the involvement in the activity of the organization, or the satisfaction of the staff related to the vision was assumed by the organization.

### **3. Methodology**

From the list containing more than 100 of universities certified to provide educational services in Romania, a partial list was detached, containing only the public-funded universities having a civil or non-military character. This first selection is legitimate because for these universities there is an institutional conditioning, associated to the contract of public financing of the educational activity by the ministry of education. The military universities, as the private ones, deal with such institutional arrangements which are associated to certain market structures with monopoly characteristics or with competition characteristics having a poor regulation or being insufficiently matured.

From the first partial list containing more than 50 universities, 33 units were selected from 20 significant cities: Bukarest, Brasov, Ploiesti, Iasi, Cluj-Napoca, Timisoara, Oradea, Constanta, Tirgoviste, Pitesti, Baia-Mare, Galati, Sibiu, Craiova, Tirgu-Mures, Alba-Iulia, Resita, Bacau, Suceava, Arad, that practically cover the whole territory of the country. Even if several important universities were omitted, few small specialized universities, and the unique representatives of certain cities which distinguished themselves as university centers after 1990, there are sufficient

elements which suggest that the overall image offered by this sample can be identified with the overall image of the civil public universities.

The group of the surveyed universities shows relatively balanced characteristics related to the representativeness referred to some basic criteria of classification. From the group of universities, 14 have a universal structure and 19 have a specialized structure, e.g. medical sciences, engineering, economic sciences. A number of 15 universities represent on their own the city they are located in, the rest being a part from certain groups of two or more organizations belonging to a university city.

The research of the mission and of the objectives related to the chosen universities was done by accessing the official websites of universities. No written documents were collected, considering that in this manner a *de facto* evaluation of the transparency is made, related to the presentation of these elements.

The analysis dealing with elements of interest, visible mainly in the content of strategic plans and of the university charter, implied formal and contents elements referred to certain theoretic landmarks well-known in the „nowadays” management and frequently quoted in the Romanian space. In the matter of mission, the works belonging to Abel (1983) and David (1988), and in the matter of objectives the „landmark” is represented by the works of Drucker (1954, 1974).

#### **4. Findings**

The study of the mission statement belonging to the universities chosen for the respective sample suggest from the beginning a differentiated perception related to the role of these statements. A certain exposure of the mission on the front page of the official website or the possibility to access it due to a specific link or e-mail show that the respective university assumes that the statement has a marketing role and the straight explanation, in a clear form and using a literate and „commercial” expression represent the first attractive element for the potential students or for other stakeholders. Only 7 universities preferred this specific exposure, the rest bearing their mission „hidden” in their charter and/or in their strategic plan.

Most of the universities placed the mission in their charter in a „legal” form; in other words the form of one or more articles which seem to be wanted to generate certain consequences at the level of constitutive and functional regulation of the organization. The charter can be accessed on the site in the case of almost all the universities, but there are also few situations of „invisibility”.

A mission statement can be found also in the strategic plans offered. For the period 2007/08 – 2011/12 certain plans may be visualized in 20 cases. By comparing the mission in the plans with the one existing in the charter, one can estimate that more consistent differences appear in 7 cases, but certain slight expression differences appear in other cases. This situation may be the result of a certain „modernization” of expression at the level of the newer document. In several cases, missions are discussed in the same statement, or different missions can be identified for the research activity or for the faculties that compose the university.

The analysis of the conceptual contents, related to the missions statements, show that there is an express concern to declare a specific interest on the research activity. Being aware of the negative financial consequences induced by the ministry in the situation when a certain university declares itself as being interested only on the educational process, the form of declaration represents only an element of protection, without the possibility of reflecting in a realistic manner a state of facts or an intention that may be sustained.

The scientific area which bears a certain interest for the educational and research activity is underlined in the case of the specialized universities, for instance in the case of 15 universities from the whole of the ones that were researched. Even in the case of these universities, a differentiation related to the specialization, where the excellence is searched, doesn't seem as really obvious. For the universal structured universities and also for the polytechnic universities, a preeminence of certain scientific areas is not obvious. In these terms, there is no element of distinction for a medical university or for an agricultural sciences university belonging to the

respective category. The initial ministerial disposition aimed exactly at defining a certain distinctive feature associated to „the product”. This distinctive feature becomes less visible when it is related to the geographic area or to characteristics belonging to the students. Only three universities associate their activity to a certain geographic area or to applicants who come from the respective area. The ambiguous expression is almost general, without emphasizing a potential „pole of attraction” for the teaching staff, for partners or for the students. If one reads only the formulation of the mission, it is unlikely to identify the university, excepting the named cases and a small number of other universities having a certain specialization or a unique position in Romania.

A discussion related to the principles or to the values exposed in the mission can be done only by corroborating them with other elements presented in the charter, or with the general objectives exposed in the charter, or in the strategic plan of the respective university. The comparative study of the concepts associated to the same label, as, for instance „the autonomy of the university”, „student-centered education” or „academic freedom”, shows a strange dispersion of the definitions inherently associated. The university X and the university Y understand a different thing when defining the academic freedom. The identification of values is more difficult when certain concepts are added, using formulations marked by stereotypes that empty the concepts from their meaning. „The development of the personality”, „the competitive formation”, etc. are discussed, but without revealing the real meaning of these collocations.

From the point of view related to the style of the mission, one can observe that most of the universities prefer a list-type presentation, which translates as avoiding the use of certain predicates with a clarifying role. Another part of the researched sample distinguishes itself due to a style that aims at being concise, but the utterances are abrupt, bombastic and without a logical relation between sentences. Only few exceptions use a „humane” style, which supposes to avoid a stereotype language.

The review of the objectives exposed in the strategic plans and also in several charters show a considerable difference from Drucker’s recommendations. There is a relative superficial approach regarding the objectives in several cases, and an ambiguous time reference in others, associated in most of the situations to the term „permanent”. So, the reference to the SMART characteristics is gratuitous. The pragmatic consequence is that every process of evaluation becomes useless, because the reference system is missing. In fact, the formulation of the objectives doesn’t allow the coherent measurement in order to compare the results, which, as a matter of fact, are not specified.

The display of objectives is centered on collocations built on „the development”, „the growth”, „the consolidation”, „the security”, „the modernization”, „the improvement”, „the achievement”, etc., terms having an ambiguous and equivocal character which determines the difficulty of any evaluation, more particularly as any specific quantitative or temporal element is missing. Paradoxically, in various operational plans the objectives do have SMART characteristics, especially in those associated to the investments in the infrastructure. One can infer that the formulation was deliberately chosen, in order to not turn into „negative” elements, neither for the ministry, nor for other stakeholders. Both the ambiguous character and the fact that the verbs suggest certain processes instead of the targets make the used expressions to be rather goals than objectives.

The manner of expressing the objectives and the missions generates significant similarities between them instead of a distinction able to differentiate between the idea and the implementation.

## **5. Conclusions**

One can observe that for the researched universities the exercise of formulating the mission and the objectives is a formal one, induced by an administrative obligation, without a real maturation of a necessity imposed by the market. The formulations are quite similar across universities in the

sample that has been studied and they address administrative recommendations. They fail to feedback with suggestions that result from the practice and experience of the companies, or from the theoretic ones offered by contemporary strategic management. The management has only instrumental value and the marketing component becomes insignificant. It's obvious that the process of formulating the objectives and the mission involved only in few occasions the experts in the management theory, and the consultation of other persons interested with this matter was eventually accidental. When comparing the results achieved with the prescriptions of the mission or with what are desired to become the objectives of the organization, one cannot express negative estimations related to the management team.

The number of the public universities omitted by the study is less than the one of the used sample. Due to „the uniformity” observed, one may assume that it stays the same for the omitted organizations. However, their existence offer the advantage of a certain uncertainty related to the quality of the mission statement or the quality of formulating their objectives.

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