

EDUCATION AND COMPETITIVENESS IN THE GLOBALIZATION ERA

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Abstract: *The educational system is one of the important factors in creating and developing the competitive forces of a country. The higher education provides the socio-economic environment with two basic services: teaching and research. The duality marks an entire history for higher education, but nowadays a new dilemma has emerged: economic efficiency (the university as an economic provider of services) versus academic competitiveness (the university as a research forum). In addition, a new challenge seems to be altering the future of higher education, these stemming from the massive increase in the demand for university teaching services: elite higher education, thus efficient, highly competitive academically (competitiveness), or mass higher education, adapted to the demand, with the primary role of harnessing knowledge through professional training (effectiveness).*

Education – a factor of competitiveness?

Currently, competitiveness is defined in a relative manner, using comparative terms. Thus, an economy is more (or less) competitive than another country on the global market; a system (the educational one) is or is not competitive when compared with similar systems in other countries. This relates to the extent to which an organization / body has a higher performance than others depending on certain criteria.

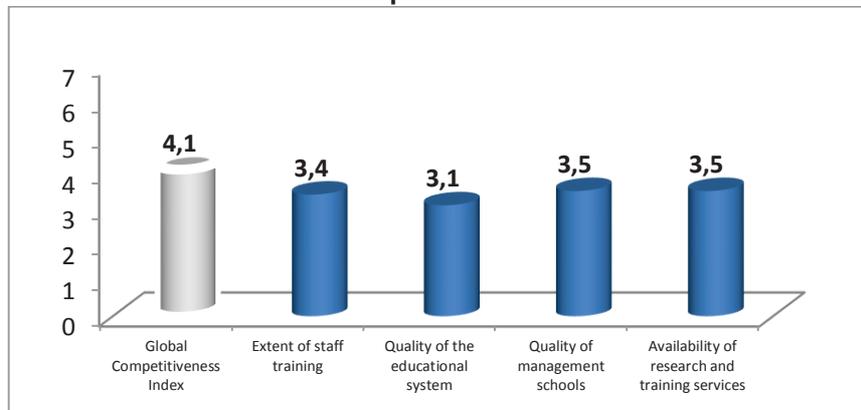
But competitiveness - as a measure of performance - can also be defined in relation to a community's own project: realistically, i.e. in relation to the resources available and their degree of capitalization, respectively, idealistically, i.e. in relation to the expectations or dreams of that community. An economy/educational system is perceived as more competitive when it has a higher capacity to harness the national, material or spiritual "productive forces".

According to the OECD, competitiveness is "the capacity of companies, industries, regions, nations or supranational bodies, engaged in international competition, to ensure a sustained relatively high income by capitalizing on the factors of production, as well as a higher income by capitalizing on the labor force " (*Bulletin of the EU – Supplement nr.3/1994, p. 17*). The two dimensions are considered equally important, although debates on competitiveness tend to focus on the comparative approach. For a while now, The Global Competitiveness Report presents an annual ranking of countries in terms of competitiveness, based on the classification of its determinants

in several "pillars". One of these - the 5th Pillar - is *Higher education and training*, which, along with the 6th Pillar - *Goods market efficiency*, the 7th Pillar - *Labor market efficiency*, the 8th Pillar - *Financial Market Development*, the 9th Pillar - *Technological readiness* and the 10th Pillar - *Market size*, define the economies based on efficiency (*efficiency-driven economies*).

The statistical data regarding competitiveness ranks Romania on a modest place at the global level and among the last places at the EU level. (See Chart 1)

Chart 1
Romania: competitiveness indicators

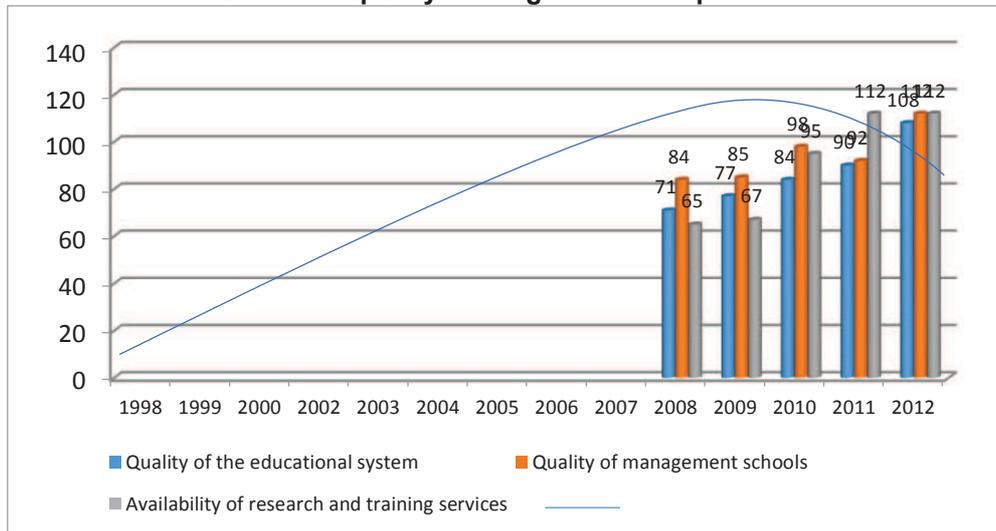


Sursa: *The Global Competitiveness Report 2012-2013*

Moreover, the data from the chart suggests that the educational system is perceived as less efficient (in terms of competitiveness) with respect to the national economy. In other words, the assessment of the business environment -The Voice of the Business Community - namely the opinion of those interviewed, i.e. persons with management positions in businesses, is more inclined towards the negative: the general index of competitiveness of Romania is slightly above the median, whereas the quality of the educational system is at the level of 3.1 (on a progressive scale from 1 to 7) and the management of schools at 3.5.

In a study conducted a few years ago, the conclusion reached was that "international statistics give us a disastrous image of the Romanian educational system, nearly 20 years after the Revolution. At all levels within the educational system – lower secondary, upper secondary and tertiary (higher education)– Romanian students' performances are less than mediocre " (Anton A)

Chart 2
Romania: the capacity of integration - competitiveness



Source: *The Global Competitiveness Report 2012-2013, 2011-2012, 2010-2011, 2010-2009, 2008-2009, 2007-2008*; United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization; www.unesco.org

On the other hand, the perception of the role of tertiary education in increasing competitiveness is increasingly negative. As presented in Chart 2, the share of those enrolled in higher education from the total population has more than tripled between 1998-2009 (after which a downward trend can be observed), and the competitiveness indicators in this area are getting worse (lower positions in the global hierarchy).

The increase in the number of those enrolled in the system of tertiary education is a general characteristic of former socialist countries. In Romania, the number of higher education organizations has increased from 46 in 1989 to 63 in 1993 and then to 126 in 2000: the number of students enrolled increased from 215.226 in the academic year 1991/1992 to 503.152 in 2000/2001 and continued to increase to 907.353 in 2007/2008 in all forms of education and study modes. Several factors explain this expansion: a) "the decompression effect" - the right to free enterprise earned after the revolution, on the one hand, and the massive demand for higher education services, on the other hand, have contributed to the expansion of the higher education system; b) "the synchronizing effect"- reconnected to the North Atlantic value system, the educational system has experienced an unprecedented diversification, transposed in the increased number of those integrated in the system (students, but also professors); c) "training effect"- which stemmed from the labor market in full expansion mode, in the context of an upward economic trend at the global and regional level. The crisis at the end of the last decade has stopped this expansion, primarily in its quantitative component.

Evaluating the educational system of Romania

"In every country higher education is the moment of truth for the entire society" (Wikipedia, Romanian language edition, Education in Romania). The above

sentence summarizes a current perpetual outlook of the Romanian society: the educational system has more than an operating value (a factor of competitiveness), as it is also a factor in the creation and consolidation of institutions and national consciousness.

Therefore, we are interested in evaluating the higher education system from this perspective, by assessing the degree to which it meets the professional and civic training of the youth, those who will have in the immediate future business responsibilities and will represent "our distinct voice in the context of globalization". If we analyze, from this point of view, recent evaluations, we find that they are polarized in two directions: positive evaluations (from reasonable to very optimistic) and negative evaluations (from reasonable to catastrophic).

In a study conducted in May 2007 (Comsa M; Tufis C; Voicu B, 2007), 70% of the professors interviewed believed that Romanian higher education was as good as that in Western Europe, while only 59% of students agreed with this assessment. When asked "Is Romanian Higher Education at least as good as that in Western Europe?" the following results were obtained: 69% of professors, 58% of students and 50% of the adult population responded positively; when asked the question: "Are the professors of private higher education competent?" the following results were obtained: 58% of professors, 71% of students and 0% the total adult population responded positively.

On the other hand, in another official report (Miclea M, 2009) it is estimated that maintaining the current educational system in Romania is threatening the competitiveness and prosperity of the country. This educational system has four main problems: it is ineffective, irrelevant, unfair and of poor quality.

This latter view seems to be quite widely accepted among intellectuals. In a post found on a blog in 2011 (Diaconescu A, 2011), the author refers to: congenital illnesses (which pertain to the 'heavy communist legacy '), chronic diseases (for example, the mismatch between theory and practice) as well as acute and endemic diseases specific to the last 20 years.

On the other hand in a comprehensive approach from the year 2010 (Vlasceanu L. , Miroiu A, Paunescu M , Hancean M, 2010) it was considered that *"the overall picture of the qualitative state of our higher education, as it is reflected in the perceptions of universities, students and employers, is that of high quality"*.

A recent assessment of the educational system of Romania, which can be taken as a benchmark, is that of French Ambassador Philippe Gustin, whose initial profession was that of a professor. His Excellency states that Romania is not an underdeveloped country in terms of education. "You have an educational system that is highly efficient, particularly for creating elites; unfortunately this causes the loss of a million students." (school dropout appears to be the biggest problem in education).

Beyond these contrasting evaluations - sometimes taken to the extremes - the conclusion seems to be the same everywhere: the Romanian educational system needs to be reformed.

What does "modern university" mean?

Since ancient times, there are two views on school mission: one that aims to foster the development of human personality, and one that aims at preparing citizens to participate in public affairs. For Plato, the purpose of education is to cultivate the intellect to form personalities able to understand the universal laws, the essence of

life processes and phenomena; in contrast, to Isocrates the purpose of education is the formation of a personality able to participate in solving the problems of society. In other words, an education centered on the man as a cultivated person, on the one hand, and as a member of the society, on the other hand.

However, the development of higher education has not been made through strong options for either of the two orientations - "culture" or "civilization" - but through the specific positioning in the space defined by the two coordinates. University means education, cultivation of the values, formation of human personality. But the university also means education, knowledge transfer and creation of intellectual skills.

Regarding school today, several dimensions should be highlighted.

A first approach is due educator and American researchers Abraham Flexner, sustaining that "modern university is characterized by suitability for specific requirements of each stage of social economic development. University is "an expression of time or" influencing the present and the future of the society.

Another dimension of "modern university" is revealed by the philosopher Jacques Derrida: academic freedom, unconditional freedom to ask questions and make suggestions "search for truth, without any condition, is what defines this condition.

A third feature is revealed by what one author (Ramaley J, 2004) calls the "engaged university" or the society involved in solving the specific problems of that time. The rigor of the research, the quality of the educational product and the organic link with the community to which it belongs and the impact on the quality of life of citizens nationwide and globally are the key success factors of the university of the XXIst century.

Finally, another approach (The Boyer Model of Scholarship) assumes that more than ever in history, the university must be involved in the social, economic and ecological environment to which it belongs. It should not only help to increase the dowry of knowledge and intellectual values of the society, but also to solve the specific needs, individual and social, belonging to the environment in which they develop.

The reform of the Romanian higher education system

The history of education in Romania (see Wikipedia) highlights two crucial issues for our education. The first problem is the delay we have in creating high education (Univ. Iasi, 1860, Univ. Bucharest, 1864, Univ. Cluj 1919); in a recent paper (which has given rise to controversy) Paprika Lucian history emphasizes that delaying in the creation and development of institutions is due to persistent cultural and economic gaps between Romania and the western world. (Boia L, 2012) A second problem is the existence of turning points - reforms that marked the development of higher school to us. Spiru Haret Reform 1880;The inter war Reform, basically a consolidation and expansion of the previous reform; drastic changes in the communist experiment (48-49 copying Soviet system; partial liberalization in 1958; 1972 nationalist Stalinist system).

Beyond the performance deficit during that period, caused in large part by the tendency towards islanding (nationalism) and ideology (communism) of the system and consequently of education in general, of the university in particular, one embodiment of the system is generally recognized (and not infrequently evoked by the nostalgic): efficacy, its coverage (literacy etc.) respectively the success with respect to mass education.

After 1990, there were two important events marked by the enactment of a special law: Law Education 1995 Education Law nr.1/2011.

After 1990, the question of the reform was put in terms of the need to raise the quality of education in the context of general restructuring in the post-communist times. The first stage of the reform in education scare was marked by GEO. 75/2005, then enacted by Law no. 87/2006. There were two conceptions of quality at the moment: one in which quality is related to their institutional goals (fitness for purpose), and another where the quality is related to a set of predetermined and universal standards (standardization). Although [8] mentioned in the preamble of the law above mentioned, implicitly, both orientations, the main legislative subsequent provisions frame the Romanian system of quality assurance in the second philosophy.

Translated into terms we use above these guidelines would mean that, the first case it is about effectiveness, and the second about competitiveness. This option can be related to a famous dispute of the interwar period – the one of the followers of "synchronism" and respectively of the protochronism (with its postwar extension); with reference to a problem highlighted from the first period of the synchronization of Romanian culture with western culture – the risk of "forms without substance". A second stage of reform was established by the Law from 2011. This time it is about a determined approach in terms of "competitiveness" in the sense of imposing a model that meets the criteria set out for the universities of the North Atlantic area. This reform has several features. First, a classification of universities into three categories: universities focused on education, universities for education and research, universities for advanced education and research. We are talking therefore about the establishment of a hierarchy – matching the American model – of the higher education institutions, with consequences on the types of study programs that these universities can provide (bachelor, master, doctorate), as well as on the level of funding from the budget. Should follow the "hierarchy of study programs in which there would be involved, as well as in the first stage of classification, independent foreign experts".

Then, a more dynamic approach of ' the change in generations' in higher education, through forced retirement of teachers – elders – who met the criteria (age of retirement, determined by Western model - French) and promotion of the superior teaching positions - youth - which meet the criteria (for promotion ,established by the ministry after the Western model). Finally, imposing as an absolute criterion of professional assessment of the scientific research reflected in articles (ISI) : the article ("creation science") is more important than the book ("mere compilation"). Finally, the university must become 'student centered', 'students are considered "partners" of institutions of higher education and equal members of the academic community. "Basically, "The law provides penalties for universities to their curricula admit more students than capacity approved school", a *numerus clausus* established after the approval of that capacity of schooling.

There is no chance of a temporal perspective, essential to assess the effectiveness of reforms since the project was seriously adjusted by subsequent legislation. We can say, however, that the project was a bitter effort of making more competitive – in the vision of the promoters – the higher education. In fact, in the post-1990 we witnessed the confrontation of two types of reform; one that, starting from the model inherited, is trying to adapt to new conditions – with significant compatibility

adjustments with the European model – and a new American model, imposed by law.

The effectiveness of legislation proved to be relatively low, the educational system in general and the university in particular, facing many changes through decisions that changed or altered the spirit or even the letter of these laws. The perception of education reform is generally negative, while the assessments regarding the capacity of the education system are generally optimistic – a paradox of the current state of education.

Conclusions

First, a university is not competitive by law (Decree, emergency ordinance, etc.). Through legislation, with lasting effect, the effectiveness of the educational system may be enhanced, as well as its ability to integrate, educate and train young people as intellectual figures (Plato) and active citizens (Isocrates). The competitiveness of the schools depends on the extent to which they enable assertion of the elite system – students and teachers – capable of generating new values within that system and to determine the effects of training on the entire university environment. The affirmation of the elites is an organic process that takes place with the development of the educational system; pre-requisite separation on categories (by circumstantial criteria) can be deeply counterproductive.

Secondly, the Romanian reference model must remain the European type, even if adapted to the dominant trend – the Anglo-Saxon –specific to the globalization process. If the education reform in 1880 aimed at modernizing the Romanian education system in accordance with the requirements of design and development of the national state (the national consciousness, national values), in the XXIst century the reform in Romania should aim at the performance of the education in relation with the requirements of the European and global economy.

Third, a modern university means a university corresponding to its time, one which has a history and a future perspective. In other words- and despite what the phrase suggests prima facie – it is fundamentally the university of today, not of tomorrow. The university of tomorrow is just a project for the evolution of the university of today.

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