

CHALLENGES FOR THE EDUCATION SYSTEM AND EDUCATIONAL POLICIES IN ROMANIA

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Abstract: *In terms of secondary and higher education performance, Romania is below other countries in the region, due to under-funding and a rigid and overly centralized system. To remedy these deficiencies, we recommend a flexible approach to educational policies, favoring decentralization as well as private initiatives and investment in education at all levels, within a general framework of targets and standards for quality, relevance, impact and access for all. Reform must be supported by increasing spending for education and prioritizing funds allocation for essential objectives, such as the adequate remuneration and training of personnel in education and strengthening the research and international cooperation potential of universities.*

Keywords: *secondary education, higher education, education policy, international tests (TIMSS, PISA), funding of education, tutoring, academic research, brain drain.*

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According to assessments of international organizations such as the World Bank, OECD and European Commission, through its extended educational infrastructure, Romania seems, at first glance, well placed to prepare young generations for the economic and social challenges of the 21st century¹.

According to international statistics, in terms of literacy rate and primary enrollment, Romania is placed at the same high level recorded in Central and Eastern Europe. In terms of enrollment in secondary education, sluggishness of Romania compared to other countries in the region reflects, in addition to a misallocation of resources, the existence of

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¹ Final Report of the Knowledge Economy Forum "Using Knowledge for Development in EU Accession Countries" Paris, February 19-22, 2002.

broad categories at risk (poor families in rural areas where population share is about 40 %, as well as in outskirts of major cities) affected to the greatest extent by under-funding and under-staffing in education. Also, in terms of share of education spending in GDP and share of higher education graduates in population, Romania is lagging behind, while participation in vocational training and lifelong learning is still low².

International experts are also warning that a well developed but inflexible education system might impede transition towards knowledge based economy just as much as an underdeveloped one³.

Teaching style in secondary education traditionally focused, as in most former socialist countries, on the requirement of memorizing vast theoretical knowledge to the detriment of practical applications and communication exercises, within strictly centralized, overly detailed and inflexible curricula, while prioritizing training of exceptional students to win awards in international competitions and paying much less attention to the needs of average students.

A comparative assessment⁴ of secondary education quality in Central and Eastern Europe, based on TIMSS (Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study) results, remarked, on the eve of EU accession, a widening gap between two groups of countries: on the one hand, countries like Czech Republic, Hungary and Estonia, which had approached the Western educational features and were achieving better results than most Western countries, despite lower educational expenses; on the other, the remaining Central and Eastern European countries, including Romania, with a much poorer performance, not proving the capacity to educate its young generations in order to become competitive on EU labor markets.

These results are consistent with those of successive PISA tests drawn up by OECD, suggesting that performances of Romania's secondary education are far below that of those countries in the region which have managed to close the gap with the Western states.

At the same time, legacy of the past, when access to higher education was strictly limited, has not been yet rectified. While most EU states have concluded the transition from an elitist to a generalized access in higher education, this process is still ongoing in Romania.

² World Economic Forum - The Global Competitiveness Report, 2009-2010.

³ Final Report of the Knowledge Economy Forum "Using Knowledge for Development in EU Accession Countries" Paris, February 19-22, 2002.

⁴ A. Ammermüller, H. Heijke, L. Wöszmann - Schooling Quality in Eastern Europe: Educational Production During Transition, SSRN Working Paper Series, 2003.

Proliferation of private universities and the increased interest of the young generation in their graduate and post-graduate programs slowly raise the share of highly educated population. But still limited financial resources, in conjunction with giving up the exigent entrance exams in public universities, seem to decrease the overall quality of the system. At the same time, focusing almost exclusively on teaching to the detriment of research is an additional factor deterring the best graduates to consider a university career. Most universities are not concerned with the quality of teaching, as students do not put pressure in this respect, seeming more interested in the degree than in the extent and quality of their knowledge upon graduation⁵.

In conclusion, there is potential for human capital development in Romania, but to build upon it requires connecting the educational system to the changing needs of the economy.

First, Romania needs to adjust the secondary education system, to complement theoretical formation with achieving the skills, abilities and competences required on the labor market. In this respect, Romania could draw inspiration from the balanced solutions chosen by the Czech Republic for restructuring its own education system: moderate reduction in the number of teaching hours and mandatory courses, introduction of optional courses, organizing of math and science teaching on two levels – a basic one, based mostly on practical applications, and an advanced one, for students with a keen interest in the field, with greater theoretical load; also, is worth imitating the concern for early identifying students' skills and interests, organizing sub-classes based on students' interests in various fields, encouraging participation in national competitions and other complementary activities to formal education, keeping a high interest in forming competitive teams to participate in international contests, organizing extensive teacher training programs, both on pedagogical/ methodological and specialized matters⁶.

The role of government is changing under this approach, from operating and controlling formalist education institutions, including micro-management of curricula and administrative projects, towards establishing general goals and standards of quality, relevance, impact and access for all, while leaving space for decentralized initiative and

⁵ Romanian Academic Society – Yearly Report, 2007.

⁶ Ivo Volf – Science Education in Czech Republic, Euroscene Report, Hradec Kralove, 2004.

responsibility in education at all levels and creating opportunities and incentives for private investment and innovation in education.

For example, one of the side effects of secondary education underfunding by the government seems to be the emergence of a private educational market consisting of tutoring provided by teachers alongside their didactic activity in schools. In our opinion, legally restricting such practices or attempting to discourage them through taxation would be counter-productive, given that this parallel system provides some benefits such as increasing society's investment in knowledge and motivating students through fees, a more flexible learning process and possibility to focus on personally important and appealing subjects.

The two systems overlapping and tutors sapping on public education without bringing value added is a risk to be avoided. But this is an additional argument for curricula reform and revisiting of teaching and assessment standards, so that average students should be able to attain basic performances without having to resort to tutoring. If this is secured, tutoring could be a useful complementary tool for students particularly interested in particular subjects and wanting to deepen the basics offered in the formal school system. Henceforward, acknowledging that the state alone can not meet all the educational needs at an appropriate level, especially under fiscal austerity, the next step would be to support tutoring market development so that it should bring added value to the public education, through providing incentives for teachers to organize, self-regulate and share best practices, while also providing public financial support to allow access of children from poorer families in this system and offering rewards for performance.

The key to a successful reform is to increase spending on education. But it must be upheld that this can only be done gradually, starting from the current extremely low level. Thus, to maximize the effects, allocations should focus on key priorities for securing a quality education. In particular, under-staffing of education and training sector - teachers, trainers, counselors, administrators, etc. - should be addressed, in terms of both number and quality (e.g. through attractive wages for attracting valued graduates to a teaching career, widespread training programs for teachers).

Romanian universities, through their currently underused research potential and ability to provide an inexhaustible source of new ideas and projects generated by successive generations of students and researchers, can play a prominent role in the development of competitive clusters in

innovative industries and creative services. For this purpose, it is necessary to enhance universities' creative potential, on the one hand through additional investment in development of their research platforms, and on the other by stimulating their entrepreneurial behavior – e.g. through entrepreneurial education, development of infrastructure to exploit research results (start-ups, spin-offs), patents market, competitive grants, etc.

Through smart policies, consisting of a careful combination of facilities, incentives, favorable regulations and public relations, Romania might capitalize on the propensity of prestigious Western European and Northern American universities to set up subsidiaries abroad, aiming at attracting them to make better use of the domestic educational and research infrastructure established by public and private universities. But to draw interest of such prestigious universities, Romania needs to prove ability to carry out higher education and research programs at international level, which requires coherent policies based on real performance assessment of universities and, especially, adequate funds.

Propensity of gifted Romanian youngsters to study abroad is very intense, the exodus being driven by their wish to benefit from quality standards of education and international recognition of qualifications and to take advantage of career opportunities in Western education and research institutes or multinational companies. This trend damages the quality of human capital at home, as result of a large part of valued students deciding to stay abroad, thus wasting the potential added value they would have brought to the development of Romanian society. On the other hand, the superior education provided to young Romanians by prestigious universities abroad could be an opportunity to be capitalized at home, including within Romanian universities, provided that measures to stimulate and facilitate return are adopted (e.g. through streamlining diplomas equivalence procedures and establishing a competitive system for selection of staff in education and research, based on objective and internationally recognized criteria).

Therefore, Romania should be concerned with regaining prestige of higher education institutions, through creating financial and professional incentives to attract the best graduates and counter the negative effects of brain drain, while stimulating employment opportunities across all sectors for highly qualified specialists.

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