

"The Development of the Romanian Academic Research on the Academy of Economic Studies. The First Lessons as a European Union Member State"

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***Abstract:** Interdisciplinary academic research is one way to improve education quality via research as this implies scientific development, incorporating high technology into academic processes as well as formulating innovation-driven processes and services. Having these objectives in mind, the current project seeks to act along two major directions: on the one hand, improving the quality of academic research, on the other hand boosting its efficiency and noteworthiness on a world scale. The first vista aims to strengthen academic research capacities, which must be achieved by having education processes meet knowledge-based economy exigencies. From the perspective of this research under discussion, this paper explores the effects of European integration on the quality of Romanian economic higher education in its positioning on the European educational market and the attempts to define its specific profile in the central and eastern-European area. The authors raise questions regarding the roles universities want to play in the future, regarding the awareness towards the needs of the institutions, the needs of the teaching and research staff and, mainly, the needs of the students. On a particularly aggressive market, it becomes necessary that Romanian academic research and higher education on the Academy of Economic Studies should reflect on the first lessons which the new status of the country's European Union membership gives to the Romanian prestigious universities.*

Keywords: University funding system, higher education, teaching quality, research quality, research elite.

Introduction

Since the birth of European universities, over 1,000 year ago, scholars have disregarded political and cultural barriers. Leading historians agree that the medieval traveling scholar may well have been the first European citizen.

In more recent times, however, the university systems of Europe have evolved along national lines, reflecting the success of the Nation State as the main form of social organization. In contrast, our present time is marked by vast processes of integration: globalization on a world scale and several attempts at regional integration, of which the European Union is by far the most advanced and successful experience.

If we try to talk about how to unite Europe, we cannot overlook the need to better coordinate universities and other centers of higher education across the continent. In other words, we need to build a coherent and attractive European area for Higher Education (Beath, 2005). An issue linked to the problem of fragmentation is that of a Europe-wide system of quality assurance. Some progress has been made, but we are still far from mutual recognition of quality assurance systems and assessments.

Another major issue emerged from our international comparisons: (Figel Jan, 2004)

 The EU invests only 1.1% of GDP in higher education, compared with 2.3% in the USA;

 In research, the figures are 1.9% in the EU and 2.7% in the USA.

Because universities have a role both in teaching and research, the impact of these two lines of deficit affect them in a cumulative way. A closer look reveals that most if this disparity is due to the contribution of the private sector, which is much lower in Europe than in the States. Funding per student in higher education is on average more than twice higher in the USA, and in leading universities it is often up to 5 times higher.

We believe we need to rethink our university systems; in most European countries their development has not kept pace with broader changes in society and the economy.

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When Romania became a member state of the European Union in January 2007, this reopened the discussions about the quality standards necessary for an education system of European level and about the role of the higher education institutions (HEIs) in the society of knowledge. [Constantin, 2006].

Romanian universities add to the stock of useful knowledge through their research and disseminate that stock through their teaching, but what determines the amounts of each that they do? How the universities participate in the process of commercializing research?

Achieving quality in teaching and research takes time and as academics are time-limited, they face a stark choice. The more of their time that they spend on research, the higher is likely to be its quality. However this cuts back on the time that they can spend teaching students and, as this has implications for staff-student ratios, it will have a negative impact on teaching quality. Of course, in view of agencies such as the Quality Assurance Agency – as well as the increasing “voice” of the student consumers, there is going to be some quality threshold in teaching that all universities will need to attain. We take account of this in our analysis.

Universities face incredibly difficult, complex decisions concerning the degree to which they participate in the process of commercializing research. While shrinking government funds may be the immediate, most visible factor forcing such decisions upon universities, there are more fundamental forces at work.

1. Identifying the actors on the educational markets

One way to identify the players on the educational market is to elaborate classifications, which are attractive to the consumers, for the potential students (candidates) present and former (graduates), but also for the investors, the financiers and the governments.

The competition is the one that pressures the higher education institutions (HEIs) to invest in the pedagogical research with the declared purpose of making students' learning more efficient. If the students do not perceive that the university in which they enrolled helps them learn better and easier and more and more today, in a more pleasant, more interactive manner, then they will turn to another institution which is more “friendly” to the student. Therefore, the higher education institution which invests more in modern learning methods and technologies will be able to attract a larger number of students who, through the direct or indirect taxes they

pay, will contribute to the future development of the respective university. (Nicolae, M., Enache, M., 2007)

Naturally, students chose the university where they wish to study after a thorough analysis of the educational market from pragmatic perspectives: the costs and the benefits which they will have as graduates of a certain institution. In the year 2007, the Academy of Economic Studies remained in the top preferences at the preliminary examinations: 8318 candidates entered the competition to occupy the 2,464 budgetary places at the 10 faculties within the Academy of Economic Studies. It is interesting to underline that, in a study performed in the year 2007 in the Academy of Economic Studies in Bucharest regarding the *Evaluation of the efficiency of education within the Academy of Economic Studies*, it was found that 60% of the 1008 candidates from the preliminary examination to the faculty of International Economic Relations (IER) which participated in the study, chose the university specialization due to the perspectives which the respective faculty offers them after graduation. These perspectives are especially related to the career which the candidate will have after graduating the university, many students considering university studies as a way of preparing in order to earn as much money as possible or to pursue a diplomatic career. Only 20% of the studied sample chose the IER faculty due to the high level of training which can be obtained as a result of a highly professional didactic process or due to the attractiveness of the studies. (Eurobarometru, 2007)

The importance of the classifications in higher education institutions (HEIs) and, as a consequence, the aspiration of the universities to enter these classifications and, subsequently, to occupy a relevant place in regard to the mission proposed by the respective institution, is a very important factor for establishing the institutional strategy. The HEIs cannot exist in an intensely competitive market without being defined in regard to the other actors and, especially, without attracting the funds necessary for development.

2. Do Romanian universities wish to enter such a competition?

Romania's new status as an EU member state creates the premises for the opening of the Romanian educational market towards the European, even the international education market. Its positioning on these markets will not take place without the existence of a quality "brand" in the offer made to the Romanian students, who presently have many more options, but also to the international ones, who can find good reasons to study in Romania.

Starting from these aspects, the Academy of Economic Studies in Bucharest chose to be a research university, which can develop master, doctorate and post-doctorate programs, can access funds from the national and European programs. IN our university there are 13 research centers, recognized by the National Council of Scientific Studies for Higher Education (one of them is an excellence one), we support seven magazines, classified by the same forum and we have over 55 financed research projects. We have been initiators and we are part of the consortium for the elaboration of the National Strategy in the Research – Development – Innovation field 2007-2013, we manage the Calist National Quality and Standardization Program and we have recently won, through competition, 22 projects financed by the Ministry of Education and Research in the national excellence program.

In order to attain its strategic objectives, *A.S.E.* has proposed a *Program for consolidating the national and international excellence in scientific studies*, estimating that the revenues obtained from the scientific studies activity in the year 2014, generated by approximately 500 research contracts, will represent at least 20% of the total revenues.

Presently, 178 national research projects and 8 international projects are being developed. In the year 2006, 68 research grants were won through national competition, having a total value of 400,000 Euro and 123 grants were won within the National Research Development and Innovation Plan, including the Program “Excellency Research”, having a total value of 1,400,000 Euro. Between 2006 and 2007, 290 doctorate theses were finalized, under the scientific management of the A.S.E doctorate scientific management board.

The results of the scientific research activity of professors are valorized through publications for didactic purposes, as well as through scientific publications in specialty magazines or publishing houses from Romania or from abroad, scientific communications presented in sessions, symposia, seminars, etc from Romania and/or from abroad, technology transfers through research centers, contracts, expertise, consultancy, etc., based on contracts or conventions concluded with partners from Romania and /or from abroad, with evaluations certified by specialty commissions. Each professor from *A.S.E.* has annually at least one publication or didactic or scientific accomplishment published in prestigious national or international magazines, registered in scientific databases, activity which represents one of the criteria for periodical evaluation of the quality of the activity performed within *A.S.E.*

A.S.E. participates through mass-media at the dissemination of the research results. Annually, at the Conference of the National Council of Scientific Studies for Higher Education, at the exposition in which the internal publishing houses participate, the *A.S.E.* Publishing house presents its significant publications, especially those which contain the results of the scientific research. The results of the studies performed within *A.S.E.* based on a contract/grant won through competition or concluded with the business environment are presented periodically in an "*A.S.E. Scientific Bulletin*".

3. The first lessons

One of the positive aspects of university rankings is represented by the improvement of the educational services as a result of an honest and truthful competition between the educational services providers. Paradoxically though, the discussions about quality and more and more sophisticated educational services happen while the students' learning interest decreases. This happens everywhere in the world, not only in Romania. We have, on one hand, institutions that make real or declared efforts for investments in more innovative educational systems, having as target the student's needs, and on the other hand, larger and larger categories of students that pass through higher education superficially, with the clear purpose to have access to a diploma and who are not interested to gain or to develop their competences. (Nicolae, M., Enache, M., 2007)

From the point of view of the present discussion, this means a significant growth of highly qualified human resources, respectively of the number of students who can actively participate in the progress of the Romanian economy when graduating from higher education. Despite all this, *between 1999 and 2003 (...) the percentage of people with higher education has increased by 0.9 percent, reaching 9.6%. The percentage is low compared to other countries (at the level of the year 1999), such as the United States – 16.4% or Great Britain – 15.4%* [The national strategic reference frame, pg. 9]. There are multiple causes, but it can be presumed that the fragmentation of the Romanian educational market, the lack of transparency and dynamism when transmitting the information to the public as a centralized system for making decisions in HEIs, that is difficult and very bureaucrat, are factors which explain the relative slow growth of the student body.

This means that a difficult and certainly traumatic period begins for Romania regarding the development of the external evaluation because in Romania the educational system has its

own characteristics which will need to be considered when elaborating the national standards. Constantin, (2006), underlines the fact that the *Romanian higher education system has focused on the teaching activity, not on the research activity, and the scientific studies institutions are competitors of the universities. (...) Additionally, the increase of the quality of higher education and the increase of the value of scientific research represents a process that develops in time and is influenced by a series of marginal aspects, such as resources.* [Constantin, pg. 14]

But this period is very useful and significant while trying to connect the Romanian HEIs to the international standards. The universities will analyze and evaluate their identity; they will delimitate or redefine their mission and, perhaps the most important thing, they will become responsible and transparent towards their interest bearers, especially towards the students.

4. Given this analysis, what are the conclusions and the priorities for future action?

First, we need to identify the modernization of Romanian universities, included, The Academy of Economic Studies, as a major priority within the Lisbon strategy. This means updating our systems to bring the service provided by universities more in line with the needs of our citizens. We believe academic autonomy entails the responsibility to adapt to a world marked by globalization and the rapid emergence of the knowledge society. This means offering curricula and research programs that are of high quality and strict relevance.

We would like to indicate *four priorities*, which should be reflected in the light of courage to act:

First, it is important that we ensure easy and smooth recognition of degrees and qualifications throughout the European Higher Education Area. This is not going to be easy: academic and political leaders should give it their full attention.

This commitment is largely linked to the setting up of compatible degrees as envisaged in the Bologna process as well as in the Lisbon Strategy. Students from the Academy of Economic Studies will increasingly look for qualifications that are easily recognized in all EU countries, especially at postgraduate level. Countries and institutions that failed on this account would likely become less attractive.

The second priority we could like to point out is the creation of networks that would include the EU universities, which are in favor of the integration of their study and research programs.

The third priority is developing regional centres of training and research. These would bring together the actors on which economic growth and social cohesion depend: teaching and research institutions, private concerns, and government bodies.

There are already outstanding examples of universities serving as vehicles of local development thanks to their attention to local training needs, to their close cooperation with industry in innovation, and to their ability to serve as a window of their region to the wider world. These examples should be disseminated throughout our continent.

Similar experiences are likely to succeed if the universities concerned value their role in society and can react rapidly and flexibly. The level of private funding of higher education and research centres will increase only if students and enterprises are convinced that what they get in return is worth the effort. (Figel, 2004)

The fourth priority, we could increase our Romanian presence abroad to help make sure that our degrees are properly recognized.

It has also shown that universities expect more from Europe and above all that they demand the freedom to cooperate and compete on equal and fair terms.

Our universities are a key factor of success for the knowledge economy and society. It is vital that the Romania invests more and more wisely into an area that will determine our future to such a large extent.

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Universities have been naively viewed as “engines” of innovation that pump out new ideas that can be translated into commercial innovations and regional growth. This has led to overly mechanistic national and regional policies that seek to commercialize those ideas and transfer them to the private sector. Although there is nothing wrong with policies that encourage joint research, this view misses the larger economic picture: *Universities are far more important as the nation’s primary source of knowledge creation and talent. Smart people are the most critical resource to any economy, and especially to the rapidly growing knowledge-based economy on which the U.S. future rests.*

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