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## **Revista de cercetare și intervenție socială**

ISSN: 1583-3410 (print), ISSN: 1584-5397 (electronic)

Selected by coverage in Social Sciences Citation Index, ISI databases

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Revista de cercetare și intervenție socială, 2015, vol. 48, pp. 183-203

The online version of this article can be found at:

*www.rcis.ro, www.doaj.org and www.scopus.com*

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Published by:

Expert Projects Publishing House



On behalf of:

„Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University,

Department of Sociology and Social Work

and

Holt Romania Foundation

REVISTA DE CERCETARE SI INTERVENTIE SOCIALA

is indexed by ISI Thomson Reuters - Social Sciences Citation Index

(Sociology and Social Work Domains)



# Perverse Effects of Change in the Romanian Academic Field

Dumitru STAN<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

According to the conclusions of a sociological research carried out almost two decades ago, for a person to become part of the Romanian society's elite, one had to be a university graduate. Anyone who succeeded in getting remarkable results in economy, sports, music, politics, etc., was recognized as a rightful member of the elite only if she/he was also a university graduate. At that time, the higher education system in Romania was functioning, to a large extent, on the organizational and scientific bases established before 1990. Since then, all levels of the national educational system were reformed, including the university, based on the idea that the country's social improvement depends primarily on the quality of education received by young generations. In order to assess the value of higher education reforms and to establish whether the university continues to be viewed as a generator of Romanian elites, we revised several aspects of the aforementioned research in a new investigation. The results reflect again the positive image that university students and teaching staff have about themselves and about the socio-cultural responsibilities of higher education institutions. Unlike the previous research, ours found out two very frequent criticisms in the subjects' answers: a. the crisis within the university is about to become as severe as the other types of crisis in the social system; b. as the social recognition of the university graduate diminishes, so do the elite status and the people's trust in the potential of the university, while the university's crisis deepens.

*Keywords:* university crisis, cultural capital, transition, the university's fundamental mission, academic excellence, anti-crisis reactions, perverse effect

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## Introduction

It has been said, perhaps in the most extolling manner possible, that the university is the institution which holds a strong monopoly over the universal (Bourdieu, 1984: 311). This statement is justified in as much as a large part of the advancements in knowledge obtained by humankind over time and in all fields are connected to the university's existence. Moreover, the gallery of great creators of culture has been largely constituted from university students and professors, as a lot of the personalities who have had a great impact on social and political evolution also came from the university medium.

Many commentators on pedagogy and education pinpoint the beginnings of higher-education in antiquity. Nevertheless, it is more reasonable not to equate the university with the *Academy* founded by Plato, nor with the *Lykeion* organized by Aristotle; not even the later Roman school curricula of the *trivium* and *quadrivium* types, or the French Palatine School can be defined as forms of higher-education, unless, perhaps, they are compared to what the other kinds of contemporary schools offered. "The university as a learning and research centre developed around the year 1200" (Cairns, 1992: 234), more precisely, when teaching no longer took place mainly in monastic schools or cathedrals, but rather in amphitheatres. It is self-understood that in the beginnings of higher-education the theological formative elements dominated, while arts, medicine and law were gradually added later.

In the medieval times, "the responsibility to study universality" (Nicolescu, 2007: 115) meant to create and broadcast knowledge of the highest order, yet without making a radical distinction between exact and speculative knowledge or between culture and science. The Renaissance and modernity imposed, however, a categorical split between the knowledge made use of in the academic medium and that of the facile education or common accessibility. At the same time it required special, 'superior' abilities on the part of both students and their teachers. Thus, the university became a higher-education institution, and its superior position needed to be justified by *the optimal attainment of several missions, which are called fundamental or founding*.

One of the first such missions is *the universalistic or encyclopedic modelling of the participants in the academic field*. This aim explains why, for example, the student N. Copernicus read astronomy, medicine, law and theology; why professor I. Newton from Cambridge University was a physicist, mathematician, alchemist, theologian and philosopher; why P. Andrei's name is linked to such fields as sociology, philosophy, logics and political science; why professor S. Mehedinti is considered a geographer, ethnologist, anthropologist and theologian as well. Even today, the socio-cultural expectations towards those who work in the university are somewhat broader than those towards one working in a narrow, over

specialized field. In the present context of sciences and professional skills, it would be unthinkable for a doctor not to know some chemistry, physics, biology and anthropology, for an economist not to know elements of mathematics, sociology, history and political science, for an agronomist not to make use of connected and complementary information from geography, ethnology, economics, etc. The encyclopedic demands of university development were characteristic of the medieval period especially; later, they became less pressing but did not disappear altogether, although the education programmes were considerably restructured and reduced. In effect, the universalist and encyclopedic requirements became implicit or subordinate, as if academics should fulfill them automatically just by being part of the academia and by being infected with the many higher education offers. The cultural assets requested of the members of the university have always been far larger than what the institution passed on to them; thus, both academic staff and students were demanded to reach performance levels beyond what they themselves had received from the university, whereas aspirants to the higher education system had to comply with draconian selection criteria. The (almost) forbidding admission criteria limited the number of graduates to such an extent that those who succeeded were believed to have exceptional qualities and to be entitled to key positions in the social system.

The second fundamental mission of the university is to perform scientific creation and assure the continuation of generations of creators. Thus, the higher-education institution is understood as “a genuine workshop for scientific work and creativity, in which the professor discovers the objective truth or *pure science* and engages young students on the path of discovery.” As sociologist P. Andrei puts it, “if the professor limits his activity to... the stiff expounding of acquired knowledge, s/he does not fulfill his mission, as s/he is supposed to set new powers in motion by making their scholarship come to life, penetrate the students’ spirit and unfold their whole being, open new horizons for them and show them higher, more splendid, more noble goals. The university does not aim to turn young students into scholars..., but it must teach them... the scientific method and awaken the passion for science and thinking in their souls.” (Andrei, 2010: 39-40). In the same note, professor D. Gusti, who was called *spiritus rector* of Romanian sociology, stated that the university is “a social community of life and concepts, which comes to life due to the close collaboration between professors and students working on a common masterpiece – the unfinished monument which is being built for centuries – science... Equal in their aims dedicated to the same Truth cult, professors and students differ only in their experience; a professor is an eternal student, while a student is by definition... a novice professor” (Gusti, 1996: 22). The most representative result of the master - disciple partnership has to be knowledge, as a reliable gauge of the intellectual strength of the university medium. As knowledge tends to be objectively capitalized on in time, and the young generation has access to the scientific results of its predecessors, one may

conjecture that the university not only prepares a new generation of creators to replace the former, but it also creates the basis for scientific performances that exceed those of the previous generations. In other words, thanks to the university, today's generation surpasses the older generations' scientific capital, while in their turn accepting the possibility that it may experience the same from future generations. Even when scientific progress is achieved in specialized research institutions which are administratively autonomous, one must not forget that its authors obtained these results due to the abilities and skills they assimilated in the university. Therefore, the university is the origin of most growth in modern and post-modern societies, which is why it can be dubbed the "engine" or the "brain" or the most authorized source of progress in evolved social systems.

The third fundamental mission of the university is to prepare students for the profession and to assess their status as specialists. In pre-modern times, going to university had a very small pragmatic motivation and lacked mercantilism completely; those who had student-status, in the very few universities across Europe, aimed at amassing more or less scientific cultural capital taken from the greatest scholars of the time, in order to be recognized as intellectual authorities in their turn. After going through ritualized procedures and exams, the stages of "learning" were confirmed by diplomas, titles or ranks. The 'scholar' status was equivalent to that of wise man, and in special contexts, he who had such a status could enjoy a higher reputation than political or military leaders. However, rarely did university graduates obtain public functions as a consequence of their studies. As a rule, the completion of higher education marked symbolic or cultural borders between individuals and the existing social barriers were consolidated; a high-ranking nobleman had every chance to increase the advantages of his social position if he also obtained a diploma upon graduation. Modernity attached two new functional orientations to the university: (1) *the reduction of the studies to the level of specialization or hyperspecialisation*; (2) *the employment of the studies in professions needed on the job market*. The higher-education graduate has thus become a specialist in a field or a sub-field of knowledge, and the acquired abilities and skills are certified only for one or a small number of professions. While preparing for a profession, a student assimilates elements of a rather abstract, basic knowledge which is nevertheless applicable to numerous particular cases (Abbot, 1988: 318) which are encountered once entering a profession. The very fact of having been confirmed as a specialist should represent the guarantee of being able to optimally function in the profession and of triggering desirable changes in society.

The university's fourth fundamental mission is *the facilitation of trans-national communication and mobility*. Most cultural goods and values which were created in the academia, especially the scientific ones, are the result of dialogues, consultations, arguments, confirmations done by experts and specialists from various higher-education centres. Sometimes they come from the same country, other

times from different countries, but in both cases they are motivated by the perspective of scientific innovation. Collaboration among academics is not a simple whim or bout of curiosity, but an absolutely vital activity because “there are too few experts in each discipline on a university campus..., one or two on small campuses and rarely more than half a dozen on large ones. These specialists must communicate not only outside the boundaries of their disciplines, but also between campuses” (Dogan & Pahre, 1993: 235). Inside their own department, academics have rather few intellectual exchanges, due to a rather large number of causes which separate them: ideological differences, incompatible preferences for theories and methodologies, vanity, in-field professional rivalry, lack of tolerance caused by character traits, divergent purposes for the use of research results, etc. From the less transparent layers of these causes one may deduce why “university departments are not intersections, but empty halls” (Dogan & Pahre, 1993: 236) and why scholars tend to keep the secret of their investigations at least until they are published or patented. The previously listed causes also help one understand why members of the academia prefer international mobilities between universities to national ones, why longitudinal communication between higher-education institutions preceded and stimulated various forms of super-national political integration, and why academics around the world are stubbornly looking for an easy common language which would allow them to feel they belong to a trans-cultural corporation. The greater the density of cultural contacts, transfers and borrowings between universities, the more rapidly will the gaps between civilizations be closed, and societies’ hopes for anti-crisis actions to succeed will increase. Because it produces, imports and exports science, the university asserts itself as an authority in the hierarchy of institutions which want to ensure the health of the social system. In order to fulfill this aim, it offers expertise and capitalizes on cognitive forces. The latter become truly operational especially when they answer to social commands, and the university is responsive to solicitations and stimulative for communication and mobility.

One final mission, perhaps the most representative for the university’s existence, is *building social excellence*. Due to the intellectual qualities of the people who make it up, the kinds of abilities and competences that it forms, the communication and assessment methods it uses, the worth of the purposes it serves, the applied strategies, the relations established with other institutions, the openness to everyday life’s problems, and so on, the university is the obvious source of obtaining society’s superlatives: (1) it sifts through longitudinal knowledge and decides on what needs to be kept and communicated to the future generations of students by permanently correcting curricula, syllabi, teaching-learning styles, etc.; (2) it guarantees that higher education proceeds at the most up-to-date level of knowledge; (3) it establishes axiological boundaries to differentiate between science and non-science, truth and falsehood, moral and immoral, specialist and non-specialist, genuine elite and speculative or situational elite, etc.; by doing so

it answers to society's demands for certainty, precision and security; (4) it annihilates or at least it diminishes the importance of exotic criteria for defining the people's merits (physical strength, kinship, fortune size, belonging similarities, etc.) and in return, it promotes the criterion of intellectual-spiritual force (graduation of education levels, attested number of study years, prizes and commendations received as a result of authoritative assessments, number of texts read or written. etc.); (5) it places its own graduates in socially prestigious positions and implicitly favors their entry to the elite segment. Every time these aspects are found in the common functioning of the social system, it can be stated that the university accomplishes its mission of generating excellence; if this does not happen, then there is concrete proof to confirm the manifestation of both a university crisis and a social body crisis. In other words, the university is by nature an institution of excellence which has two possible states: *optimal functioning*, when it produces all the situations connected to excellence, and *crisis*, when it does not accomplish all its specific missions and it cannot help society fight against dysfunctions. The first of these states is very difficult to reach, even for countries which are known to have good quality higher education. For instance, the USA holds top positions in almost all international university classifications, yet too many American students "know nothing about nothing, are abysmally ignorant... 85% wonder what the *Magna Carta* might be. The Nazis? One in three has no idea. When was Jesus born? Four out of ten students do not figure out that the answer is provided by the calendar they are using..." (Sartori, 2005: 147). If one were to add to this example the sociological research results according to which a quarter of the pupils in high school education in the USA do not meet the requirements of elementary education, 106 million Americans cannot read, meaning that they can barely spell, and that in the well-educated Italian context, inheritor of the Renaissance – the greatest of all cultural revolutions ever experienced by humankind –, 65% of the individuals state that they have never read a book, and 62% say that they do not read even a magazine or a sports newspaper (Sartori, 2005: 146) – then the picture of the educational system crisis becomes clearer. Moreover, the aspects regarding the responsibilities that the university has to meet become more important: correcting the deficiencies inherited by students from the pre-university level, adapting the academic objectives to the intellectual level of the students, joining the group endeavour of solving social crises and rethinking periodically what university excellence is.

The academic missions which we briefly presented above are principles, tenets or ideal standards for guiding the functioning of higher-education institutions of all kinds and everywhere. I called them "fundamental missions" because they have provided the university with its individuality since its inception and because they look like almost apostolical and perpetual commandments or spiritual debts to which the ones involved need to commit, whatever the costs. The extent to which these missions are accomplished has not and will never be complete, which



allows us to conclude that the state of crisis is part of the normal existence of the university and that it is a constant ingredient in its entire history. Nevertheless, the magnitude of the crisis differs from one university to the next, from one country to the other and even from one stage in the evolution of the same university to another. On the whole, such differences as seen from the perspective of the university's mission can be grouped in a simple, yet operational typology in anti-crisis projects: (1) if there is a small difference between the contents anticipated or planned by any one of the mentioned academic missions and the actual level achieved by them, one may say that the dysfunctions' impact is easy to deal with and *the university crisis is superficial*; (2) if the gap we are referring to is large and affects several missions for a long period of time, it can be said that the university is up against a *profound crisis*.

Superficial crises are not simply unimportant, meaning easy to overcome, but also necessary because they rejuvenate the university's activities and motivate its heuristic or innovative spirit. In contrast, profound crises are pathological, epidemic and extremely dangerous: they create panic and discrimination, they lead to chaotic and inefficient consumption, they encourage mutinous individual and group behaviour, they change the course of the systems away from their essential purposes: the educational system skids towards economy and business, the economic system tends to replace the one focused on social benefits, the judiciary system bends under political pressures, the ethical and deontological system becomes indulgent towards various survival commercial objectives, etc. Paradoxically, once such a crisis is in place, it generates such deep social distrust as to the possibility to overcome this state, that even the intensive actions taken to bring the crisis to a halt are assimilated to the context of rising dysfunction. Finally, any profound crisis necessitates the reform of the system where it manifests itself, it alerts the social medium as to which of its aims or missions have been perturbed and encourages society to identify action strategies ample enough to avoid the traps of reproducing similar critical effects in the future (Krugman, 2009: 188).

Periodically, the educational system, including the university system, has to be reformed or at least reorganised, even if it is affected or threatened by superficial crises only. However, the envisaged changes take place far more slowly in comparison to other areas of the social space because many distorting elements intervene in the perception and assessment of the dysfunctions. Here are some of the confusing situations which delay the end of the Romanian higher-education crisis: (1) denying that the crisis is present and minimising its intensity to the extent that the verdict according to which the solution to the crises is easy and natural is accepted; (2) associating reform interventions from outside education institutions with explanatory variables, as academics accuse that they have been involved in a risky social experiment without their consent; (3) the fear of changing the present university algorithm and of the augmentation of the noxious



changes it may suffer by replacing some less functional aspects with even less appropriate, uncertain or simply pathological ones; (4) the shameful involvement of the political system in the university's functioning and the latter's massive dependence on the external financial system, given that for Romanians such experiences are not only numerous, but also quite recent.

### **Methodological options. Argumentation**

The events of December 1989 were triggered by a national explosion of opposition to the profound crises present at all levels of the Romanian society. That sick reality had to be revigorated and repositioned in a rational sociocultural model, free of ideology, abuse and conventional lies. A quarter of a century after that irrational and anomic reality, we have the tendency to show too much clemency for the failures of the socialist system. This attitude is encouraged on the one hand by the *considerable temporal distance* which separates us from the time of the respective system's shocks and which stops us from evaluating it in the light of the true magnitude of that criminal period. On the other hand, the same permissive attitude appears as many Romanians are *disappointed by the consequences of the fall of socialism*: they participated in radical social movements, but the high costs they had to pay did not return solutions that would get them out of the crises which accompanied that time. Furthermore, in other respects recognized everywhere as crucial to sustaining the quality of life (being able to find a job easily, state-provided housing, immediate integration of university graduates in the labour market, general application of social benefits, practice of social economy for the benefit of vulnerable populations, etc.), it is obvious that the post-revolution Romanian society has not progressed, but on the contrary, it has regressed alarmingly. The regresses registered in these aspects explain why some people have nostalgic feelings towards the socialist system's offers, especially towards their humanistic dimension.

The common university model of the totalitarian period, for instance, is the object of the nostalgists' indulgence (most of whom were educated at that time), as well as of today's young generation's sympathy, impressed by the advantages it used to offer: a large number of academic and welfare scholarships, campus accommodation for almost all students, compulsory governmental allocation of a work place after graduation, the absence of tuition fees, etc. Due to such popular student perks, many of the downsides of the old university (ideologisation, favouring members of the ruling party, almost complete international isolation, total subordination to state and party, etc.) are forgiven, overlooked or defined as secondary negative aspects. Thus, the university crisis in the years before 1990 is thought of as having lacked in gravity. However, what has been happening in the Romanian university education system since then is recognized by most analysts

as a profound type of crisis or a form of “structural-functional blockage of higher-education”, caused by (Vlăsceanu, Zamfir & Mihăilescu, 1993): (1) a centralised, deeply bureaucratic system of government, coordination and control; (2) the failure of the mechanisms to match higher-education with societal demands; c. the lack of levels of differentiation in the organisation of higher education; (3) the existence of an excessive and chaotic separation between programmes of study and specialisations, which leads to early and inefficient professional training; (4) a severe lack of teaching staff and the existence of an imbalance between generations in the number of experienced and inexperienced academics; (5) a blowup of the number of higher-education institutions after 1990, especially in the private sector, although society did not really need such an enlargement; (6) the under-financing of universities; (7) the dramatic insufficiency of facilities; (8) the inappropriate quality and insufficient number of social services for students.

The impact of these undesirable situations was felt by the entire social spectrum, but most of all by the main people in the university – academics and students. Secondly, it triggered concern in the hearts of highschoolers who were about to finish school and were interested in enrolling for university very soon. In this socio-cultural context, during 1993-1996, as part of a research supported by the Institute for Educational Sciences, we investigated three samples of subjects representing three population categories (390 students from three academic centres: Iași, Bacău and Suceava, 64 teaching staff involved in training specialists in humanistic and technical courses of study; 1221 final year highschoolers from counties where there is no university, as well as from counties where universities are near and generate deep-rooted anticipatory socialisation in pupils). The samples made up of university students and pupils were investigated only with the help of a sociological survey, while the teaching staff subjects were asked for information by using both the survey and a semi-structured interview. All categories of subjects were sources for obtaining diagnoses of the intensity of the university crisis, appeal of specialisations, sources of dissatisfaction, students’ expectations about the academic medium, indentifying possible solutions for the crisis’ many aspects, the immediate and long-term consequences of not having solved the university’s critical situations in time, mutual influences of university and society crises, social selection of society’s members as an effect of university preparation, rise in the number of diplomas and the deterioration of higher-education institutions’ image, today’s university action priorities, etc. The results of the quantitative analysis of the data together with the qualitative analysis of the interpretations given by the subjects to some experiences they had in their daily lives (Flick, 1998), led us to several conclusions relevant for the topic. These confirm the profound state of crisis in the Romanian university after the escape from the totalitarian era, as well as the need for urgent reforms in the education system at this level. Similar conclusions have been restated in a recent qualitative sociological study: in the 2013-2014 academic year, 28 academics and 76 MA

students from Iași, Bacău and Suceava answered semi-controlled interview questions, which focused on issues similar to those encompassed by the research done two decades earlier. An utterly new conclusion can be drawn from the examination of the later research data and it should be applied by all the people involved with the university, especially by those who are responsible for implementing anti-crisis measures: the deeper and longer the higher education crisis, the greater the probability of the delayed reforming interventions to be unable to solve the crisis, but to trigger new perverse predicaments.

### **The facets of the university crisis during the transition**

“The transition can be defined as a middle stage between two limits: a starting point..., which is more or less known, and an end point..., that can only be predicted, and is therefore a direction rather than an actual state” (Stănciulescu, 2002: 29). Essentially, the transition is a change in society as a whole or of only a part of it, from an initial state which is found to be poor or deficient, to a state which is supposed to be better, if not ideal. The more complicated the socio-cultural medium where the transition takes place is, the more difficult, risky and controversial any process of changes may become. Therefore, the transformations accompanying the transition do not signify that certain, triumphant, precisely configured and anticipated stages have been covered, they rather reflect the lack or incoherence of the strategic criteria for anti-crisis action. From a psychosociological perspective, the transition represents a strange blend of fears and hopes, hesitant initiatives and risky outbursts, mostly positive expectancies from the members of society but not having clear or coherent support, embodiments of individual and collective involvement in the context of tense social situations, rather spontaneous and contextual uses of brainpower in identifying and legitimising comfortable urgent solutions to the numerous dysfunctional situations.

If solutions of this kind that appear in one of the structures of the social body, such as the university, are recognized by most of the beneficiaries and generate social stability in the long term, then that structure can be said to have overcome the transition period and that it is fully making use of the advantages that resulted from the pursuits of that period. As for the Romanian higher-education, its crisis started precisely when the post-totalitarian political regime came to power, when the bureaucratic and almost military order in the university was perturbed, even destructured, marking the beginning of the transitional drudgery towards a new education system and a new society. “When we think about a new society, a serious danger we may be faced with is to imagine it as something completely new, where novelty is equal to that which is different, and the future is equal to effacing the past” (Giussani, 2005: 61). In fact, many elements from the old structure are naturally reproduced because they have auxiliary purposes or

decisive roles in the development of the transition process and in curing or revealing the crisis.

Depending on the *number of elements* (scientific, cultural, organizational, ethical, professional, etc.) contributing to the university's visible identity and *their duration* from one stage to the next in the evolution of the university, we may identify a series of *hypothetical typological alternatives* as to the depth of the crisis and the particularities of the transition in higher-education: (1) the large number of such elements, almost identically reproduced over a relatively long period of time, counted in decades, but at a liminal, survival level, reveal the presence of a chronic university crisis, as well as its inability to procure and manage the resources and means necessary to implement the changes demanded by transition; (2) the large number of elements preserved in almost identical forms, over long and very long periods of time, from several decades to centuries, when the identity elements are legitimate, socially accepted and functional, indicate either the complete absence of a university crisis, or its lack of seriousness, as well as the time mismatch of launching transformations characteristic of the university transition to a different state; (3) the small number and insufficient continuity elements for a period of time longer than a year suggests the imperative need for a transition towards a new institutional model, in the context of an extended and profound university crisis; (4) the small number of recurring elements in a period of time smaller than a year, while the higher education institution behaves optimally, prefers and puts forward models of excellence (Savater, 1997: 14-15), represents a dynamic, modern university, oriented towards very short-term transition missions in the guise of organizational development, prevention and prompt interventions in relation to any kind of internal crisis or vile external influence.

These hypothetical alternative crises and transitions in higher-education institutions can be said to correspond to actual academic organisations: in *the first type* may be included all universities which, since their founding or shortly after, chose to function by imitating foreign academic models or lack autonomy completely, being forced to follow the prescriptions of outside reasoning exclusively; in *the second type* we find highly prestigious universities, such as Oxford, Cambridge, Harvard, the Sorbonne, and others, which have been implementing the recipe for functional success for a long time, where an efficient combination of tradition and modernity opens their way to leadership positions, transforms them into authority brands and protects them from the crises' dissolving aggression; the Romanian universities from 1990 to 1995 are of the third type; at that time crisis had become distressing because many of the socialist regime's directives regarding higher education were cancelled and the transition needed to be carried through at any cost in order to replace the invalidated norms with a new legislation, which matched the new socio-cultural and political realities; today's western universities can be found in *the last of the four defined types*, as they have been significantly

successful (scientific achievements, landmark publications, satisfactory funding, students interested in the quality of teaching, etc.) and adapted quickly to the pressures posed by the manifest crises, anticipating possible crises and overcoming transition periods in such a short time that they seem to have not faced crises; the changes they made were not great and needed not lead to the modification of the education by-laws.

The selection in terms of what is worth keeping and what needs to be eliminated from the contents of a modern institution, especially when it is experiencing a crisis, must be made by referral to the legislation. To take any other path would be the expression of a partial, subjective position or proof of bureaucratic violence which, normally, the social system must refuse to legitimize. For a system formalized by education, the rational way to choose between worthy, desirable or enduring aspects and perishable, undesirable or critical ones is the *law of education*. It is instrumental in enforcing a logical, stable and unified course of education at all levels, and the sweeping change of such an itinerary involves changing the law in force with a new one. The time gap between two successive education laws, and the initiatives for organisational renewal and legislative additions which are made in-between can be said to form *the transition period in the field of education*.

Each law which is generically entitled “of instruction”, “of education”, “of public schooling”, “of instruction and education” is meant to be an optimal formula for the functional education of a schooling model, valid for as long a period of time as possible, where all the successful increments from the previous transition period are to be found and which is to postpone as much as possible the system’s going through a new transition process. The Romanian higher-education, as the embodiment of the most elevated education, has experienced after the political change of 1989 a course which is significantly different from the above-mentioned formula: (1) it immediately entered (1990) *a first transition phase*, or a legislative purging phase, when the university should have been urgently freed of the guidance of the socialist ideology; (2) it brought together the transition changes and the main anti-totalitarian orientations of education in a university model found in the Law of Instruction (1995); (3) it continued the legislative improvement of the education system during *a second transition phase* which took place from 1995 to 2011, when a generous plan for ‘reviving’ Romania through education was intended; (4) it collated the changes made in this new transition stage and the need for change stated by those involved in the university in a new document – the National Education Law (2011) – which was thought to have put an end to the transitional quests and in which the university should have found a feasible, stable functioning model; **e.** the latest law has already been modified many times, and there are still proposals to change it; this allows us to state that we are experiencing *a third transitional phase* and that when it is over

the education system and, implicitly, the university will have a new organisational and operational law.

By correlating these time limits and the nature of the actual changes that have happened in the Romanian education system from 1990 to date, some obvious conclusions become apparent: (1) the transition was difficult in the academic medium until the Law of Instruction of 1995 and the Programme for Reviving Romania through Education of 1997 were passed, but it became easier after the National Education Law of 2011 came into force; (2) the modifications performed on the education system due to legislative sources such as ordinances, decisions and by-laws have not brought the anticipated stability and for this reason the three transition phases seem to constitute a continuous process or a single long period of time (1990-2014); (3) the two education laws summarised the changes that had been adopted during the previous transition stages and they were by no means documents that would mark the system's exit from the crisis; (4) the phases of the transition period, as they have been delineated, have more methodological worth in distributing the analyses on the university crisis, because they define, on the one hand, the contexts of the situation, and on the other hand, they offer clues as to the footing of the forces that society can muster to return to a normal state.

In line with these conclusions, the series of changes that have taken place in the academic field over the three transitional phases (1990-1995, 1995-2011, 2011-2014) under the government of the two education laws (1995, 2011) were attempts at identifying a functional university model which would be able to initiate powerful anti-crisis action at any time. If we take into account the large number of alterations in higher-education, the long period over which they were made and especially the instability of their application, then we may conclude that the Romanian university has not yet found a comfortable recipe for functioning and is still experiencing transition and extended crisis. Surprisingly, not even after the application of two laws meant to handle the education system problems, subsequent to the first two transition phases, were the university crises significantly alleviated. In terms of the first transition stage, here are some relevant examples from the research about the positioning and amplitude of the signs of the university crisis (Stan & Stan, 1997: 76-91).

### ***Signs of university crisis as defined by the student sample***

Directly affected by the dysfunctions of higher education, and, particularly, threatened by the possibility of suffering on long term the crises thereof, students have nominated, probably, the most acute phenomena which cause the universities' lack of attractiveness.

(1) *Unattractive outcomes of attending university.* Three arguments help students in choosing their programme of study or specialisation: *the certainty of finding a job upon graduation, the prospect of making a lot of money and the high*



*social prestige connected to the specialisation.* The society crisis leads to the social annulment of some programmes and therefore to the 'uselessness' of certain departments. Dissatisfied with the chances they have to get a job given the studies they are pursuing, the subjects listed the programmes of studies they would find tempting if they were to apply for university again: law (29%), economics (16%) and medicine (12%). Only these fields of study offer guarantees in terms of the three professional orientation criteria; the others offer the privilege of being a student, but also socially useless diplomas.

(2) *The costs of higher education are too high in comparison with the benefits students have from it.* According to the subjects, the university should give up on programmes of study with a very narrow specialisation and offer students the possibility to have 'double' or even 'triple' specialisation. Only in this situation would the university become 'truly viable' and spare the students from having to turn to attending a second faculty to consummate their studies. No less than 35% of the subjects stated that they would like for university training to be extended, saying that the additional schooling would make them more competitive and useful on the labour market. However, the same subjects point out that the slow return of the investments from the schooling period explains why few realise their wish.

(3) *The inadequate relationship between students and academic staff.* The crisis becomes manifest from the very start of this relationship as the tutors are not interested in assessing the initial real level of the first-year students' knowledge. In the absence of a diagnosis at the starting point, the teachers' curricular offer is unrealistic, and their professional dialogue with the students becomes tense, 58% of the subjects state. Almost as many subjects, 56%, confirm that the tutors are not interested at all in having harmonious relationships with their students, do not think of them as partners in an educational relation, do not adapt the scientific contents of the courses they teach to the intellectual particularities of the students or to the courses of studies they attend.

(4) *The position of the university in a duplicitous register.* The rigidity of formal academic behaviour, the overloaded education programmes, the tutors' apathy, the students' overwork and boredom, the focus on the quantity rather than the quality of the information taught, financial costs which are difficult to meet, lack of certainty as to the worth of the diploma after graduation, the small probability that the investment made during the studies will be returned, etc. are aspects which place the university in a socially undesirable region. All these elements prove the instability of the higher-education institution, its critical situation which may cause students to opt for a break in their studies or even abandon them. Nevertheless, only 7.37% of the interviewed students would choose these solutions, while the others are ready to accept the difficulties of the specialisation period as being natural. Therefore, regardless of how small the guarantees offered by higher-education to students are, their highest hopes for



social success are still linked to the university. In the years 1993-1996, the undesirable part was strongly minimised by the fact that the university graduate was attested as a member of the society elite. Even when the labour market did not validate the social usefulness of a specialisation, that is, the graduates did not get a job in the field they had studied, chances were that they could be socially successful simply because they possessed a higher education certificate.

### ***Signs of a university crisis indicated by the academic staff subjects***

Unlike students, members of the teaching staff have indicated the critical aspects of higher education in a much more technical manner, without speculative aspects, fact which evidences the existence of justified doubts regarding the immediate possibility of countering such issues.

(1) *Overworking young academics.* The most frequent difficulties encountered by young academics, according to the investigated subjects, are: the number of the teaching hours (75%), the insufficient time allotted to preparing the tutoring activities (64%), deficiencies in communicating with students (28%), lack of credibility and prestige resulted from age rather than expertise (25%). The overwork mentioned by the respondents is not caused by the legal teaching load, but by the endeavour to have a large number of classes (cumulative salary, pay by hour, both in state and private education, etc.) to cover the material needs. Moreover, most of these academic staff were doing their PhDs, which lead to a diminishing of the time spent on preparing for the professional tasks, and of the time needed to replenish one's ability for work.

(2) *Students' superficiality in attending courses and seminars.* From the point of view of nearly three quarters of the questioned academic staff (76%), the students are not sufficiently motivated to have professional achievements: exams are passed by making minimal efforts to learn, scholarships are very low, and finding a job seems not to depend on the university at all. Moreover, student folklore contributes to discourage students from learning by spreading stories about mediocre graduates who had extraordinary social success. Thus, student attendance rates have been approximated by the academic staff to range between 35% and 75%. If to this insufficiency in terms of students not participating in teaching activities we add the fact that 82% of the students prepare for the exams only during the examinations period and only by reading the lecture notes, and that even those students who get the highest grades read no more than five books as additional readings for a discipline, then it may be stated that the essence of the university crisis is mirrored in the students' level of professional development.

(3) *The accumulation of an impressive number of factors which generate dissatisfaction.* The higher-education teaching staff subjects indicated these factors in the following order: lack of free time (86%), neglect of home chores (84%), insufficient salaries (73%), inadequate preparation of teaching activities

(64%), students' lack of interest in what academics do (45%), tensed relations between young and old academics (25%), job insecurity (25%), psychological discomfort caused by the possibility that some courses of study and faculties may be dissolved (25%). As may be observed, the impact of these factors generated by the university medium on the teaching staff is greater outside the institution than inside it, which is why the members of the teaching body have the feeling that their social position is deteriorating if the university crisis is not stopped in time.

(4) *Alarming skepticism as to the university crisis being solved.* Academics over the age of 45 are pessimistic about ending the adversity found in higher education, while younger academics are a little more confident. The former argued that "at least a century's" worth of interventions from outside the institution is needed, while the latter perceive "changes in education programmes", "improvement of teaching style" and "professional development" as immediate and internal sources for easing the higher education crisis. Furthermore, because of the Romanian industry regression after 1990, technical education has declined to such an extent that the representative subjects in the sample said they would be happy to abandon their teaching careers (64%) and turn to fields which may offer them material-financial satisfaction (50%).

### ***Signs of university crisis resulted from investigating potential higher-education students***

The deficient social representations regarding universities are also confirmed by the persons who are just envisaging registering for courses of higher education, even though their age and educational background have not offered sufficient information to this end.

(1) *Student useless specialisation.* For 25% of the final-year highschoolers, the university does selfish or useless activities, as long as it does not guarantee graduates a place where they may practice the profession they train for. In contrast, for nearly 73% of the subjects, the university is 'a necessary evil', as it is the only body which mediates obtaining a higher-education diploma and a place in the society elite.

(2) *The doubtful quality of the formative act.* Although university education is in high demand, its image among candidates is rather compromised by how easy new students are selected and by the low expectations towards them during their studies. 11% of the subjects forcefully stated that, basically, the university "is interested in producing as large a number of higher education graduates as possible and does not care about their quality."

(3) *Generating unattractive and minor social expectations.* Either due to ignorance or to a nihilistic attitude characteristic to adolescents, 14% of the subjects said that they do not expect any spectacular changes in their lives once

they become students, 13% opinionated that the university is incapable of offering them anything in addition to what they got during the previous schooling stages, and 18% said they were content with the university only because it “delays the moment when they have to enter the responsibility-laden life”.

(4) *The disadvantages are more numerous than the advantages students get.* Subjects have pointed out “the delay in doing the military service” and “the diminishing of the military service period” (in the meantime, it is no longer obligatory for men to do military service), apart from getting a higher education diploma and “entering the society cultural elite” as certain advantages which the university provides. In terms of ‘disadvantages’, they identified many other aspects whose impact is obvious: “losing years in life”, having “expenses which are difficult to return”, “experiences of dreadful anxiety due to exams”, facing “a low quality of life”, depending greatly on other people, etc. Nevertheless, regardless of how large in number the disadvantages are, they are taken as granted in going through the rite of passage to social maturity by those who are about to obtain the student status.

All these indexed categories reflect the state of the university crisis in the first phase of the transition period, as well as the climate in which the first education law appeared after the demise of the totalitarian political regime. At first sight, the myriad of dysfunctions manifest in the Romanian higher-education at that time leads us to believe that the university institution was excessively compromised and that it had a significant contribution to the overall society crisis. In fact, even though it was experiencing a deep crisis, the university, alongside the church and the army, was among the institutions which were able to initiate anti-crisis action and fulfill specific missions to a satisfactory degree. In other words, despite its being affected by crisis, the university kept its imposing status: it offered the most prestigious qualifications and diplomas, it brought together the best teaching staff and the most famous researchers, it proposed solutions to exit the crisis at the level of the entire social body, it stratified the population based on the level of schooling, etc. Finally, one may argue not only that the university remained one of society’s elite institutions, but also that many structures depended on the way it functioned.

### ***Present signs of the university crisis***

As it was directly faced with the state of crisis or asked to offer remedial services to other social sectors experiencing adversity, the university had to continually perfect its ability to put anti-crisis action into practice. Identifying the procedures applied in such actions and establishing the quality of the effects obtained by the university in fighting against the crisis in its own terrain were the objectives of the qualitative sociological study done in the 2013-2014 academic year. On this occasion, almost two decades after the research summarised above,

we identified present-day signs of the university crisis. It must be noted that, although present during the third phase of the transition period (2011-2014), most of them are inherited from previous stages:

(1) *Delusive functional autonomy.* The issue of academic liberties in the guise of university autonomy has been trumpeted since 1990, long defined, invoked and explained, but it still remains to be solved. Members of the university are aware that such autonomy involves both independence from the political power and being “shielded from pressures, influence or financial fluctuations” (Văideanu, 1996: 96). Unfortunately, “*when university managers do politics, the students are manipulated by parties and political figures, while academics’ salaries can be paid only if the money comes from a political government, it is clear that the university’s autonomy is an inapplicable principle, a way to gracefully deceive*” – said an academic who has over forty years of experience in higher-education.

(2) *Pseudo-democratization of education by eliminating admission exams or reducing the requirements in the student selection tests.* The fact that all highschool graduates can apply for higher education studies would represent proof that education is democratic. However, the fact that many highschool graduates do not become students because they do not have the financial means to sustain themselves shows that admission is not only an occasion for defining social differences, but also a process of curtailment of equality of chances in relation to the education system. “*By giving up the strict selection of applicants, poor candidates have been robbed of the possibility to escape poverty. It is as if society is excluding those who need help the most and favours the already favoured,*” said a young academic with five year’s experience in state higher-education.

(3) *Inexplicable rise in the number of students.* In an official UNESCO report from 1996, it is claimed that “everywhere around the world higher education institutions are being pressured to raise the number of admitted students. At the level of the entire planet, their numbers have risen from 20 million in 1970 to over 60 million today” (Delors, 2000: 108). Recently, in Romania, the number of university graduates has risen to approximately 10% of the population, but this is a modest level in comparison to some EU countries where around 50% of their citizens are university graduates (Marga, 2009: 118). The interviewed subjects agree that going through the superior stages of schooling equals to the growth of the cultural capital, but at the same time they think that “*the studies have no purpose; it is unclear whether the university actually produces specialists, but it is certain that the number of unemployed holding a higher education diploma is increasing from one year to the next*” (MA student, 2<sup>nd</sup> year).

(4) *Study fees’ valence of corruption.* The admission criteria’s relaxation triggered a high demand in higher education. The natural outcome of this demand was the rise in the number of tuition paid places in both state and private education. The money resulted from tuition fees should ultimately represent the worth of the

educational services provided. Often, however, the students that pay tuition, as well as those who get the money from the state budget have an erroneous and perverse image about the fees' role: *"by paying the fee I ensured my graduation. I knew that I would seldom attend courses, but also that the faculty would not expel me because it would lose my money"* (MA student, 2<sup>nd</sup> year); *"in my view, a student is a piece of my salary. If I fail him in an exam and he gives up school, I am more affected than he is. This is why I prefer to lower my demands, close my eyes, appear to be deaf..."* (Member of the teaching staff, sixteen years of experience in private higher-education).

(5) *Too large a number of universities.* According to a well-versed connoisseur of the Romanian university medium, "neither Romania, nor any other similar country, can support over ninety accredited universities corruption-free. Moreover, in our case, the universities are misplaced from the very beginning in the legislation and surreptitiously put on a par with businesses or civil associations. No one knows what it actually means to do scientific research or to be a university professor anymore" (Marga, 2009: 113-114). The answers given by the study subjects are equally reproachful: *"although lacking in basic facilities, experience in the field, their own teaching staff, any serious arguments, commercial universities have been founded and accredited and they discredit the very idea of university"* (member of the teaching staff, eighteen years of experience in state higher-education); *"the new universities were helped to appear not because the education system or society needed them, but because they offered the possibility to do business in a new field: education"* (member of the teaching staff, thirty years of experience in state higher-education).

(6) *Abnormal conversion of higher education into mass education.* If the university were allowed to function by adapting unconstrained to the demands of the labour market, there would surely not exist so many universities, so many students or so many dysfunctions in the academic medium. In reality, it is not the free market that is responsible for the crisis, but the authorities' interventions (Braun, 2011), who administer possibilities rather than realities and take into account principles rather than needs. "Because we wanted to transform the university into a western institution, we decided immediately, from behind some ministry desks, on taking the easiest measure: accepting all candidates. This decision should have been taken at the end, after we had modified the basic facilities and had clarified all the rules of the game. We did not do what we should have done and we ended up having a diploma inflation, and the statuses of being a student or a university professor have become trivial", says one of the subjects, member of the teaching staff with eighteen years of experience in state higher-education. Another revealing answer was given by a second year MA student: "that which everyone has can no longer be thought of as superior, it is something common or normal; the bachelor diploma impresses no one now... and even the PhD one has lost its worth."

(7) *Anti-crisis action is taken too late and does not succeed in significantly reviving the university medium.* Without resources, methods and long and medium-term strategic vision, reactions against crises are last-moment counter-attacks or stances which have small chances to produce enduring changes. Because they happen too late, their only effect is to maintain the university at a survival level. Even this level is compromised if, according to the subjects' opinions, "*stopping academics from migrating abroad or to financially more rewarding professional fields and discouraging young people from going to western universities*" will not be successful (member of the teaching staff, thirteen years of experience in state higher-education). The students' distrust of the Romanian university's potential to exit the crisis deepens as their expectations become disappointments: "*at the start of each academic year I used to hope that something will come up, something that would motivate me, make me feel that attending the courses is worth it. But for nothing! There are the same teachers who make me fall asleep, the same unattractive teaching methods, the same mates who feign interest, although they feel the same way I do... No matter how much changed now, for me the university remains a false, failed world*" (MA student, 2<sup>nd</sup> year).

The list of indicators of the university crisis today is, according to the research results, far longer. In addition, the seriousness of their impact is not lower than the described indices, especially when the dysfunctional realities are related. We hereby list some of the signs indicated by the subjects, keeping their often metaphorical means of expression: (1) lack of intentness in teaching activities; (2) lack of earnestness in both teaching staff and students; c. useless students' assessment of the teaching body because of lack of consequences; (3) moral degradation of the diplomas and the downgrading of professional specialisation brought about by the rapid progress of scientific knowledge; (4) widening of the gaps between the professors' demands and the students' abilities; (5) learning contents brought to a theoretical and abstract level which makes higher education seem to have no connection to reality; (6) selection of young teaching staff and PhD students according to more or less subjective and unethical criteria; (7) subservient structuring of teaching groups and maintaining quiet rivalries in their midst; i. lack of organisation and cohesion in terms of trade in large student bodies; (8) university members pursuing large economic profits to the detriment of specific cultural profits; (9) counterfeit achievements presented by academics and students alike with a view to "embellish their CVs"; (10) neglecting the students' development during their undergraduate years and presenting the PhD as the 'true' consummation of professional achievement, although few students have access to this level of education.



## Conclusion

The two sociological studies have pointed to the same diagnosis: the Romanian university following the totalitarian political regime is in a profound state of crisis. The reforming endeavours have not suppressed the crisis, they only led to the proliferation of its aspects. Moreover, because the university is not fulfilling its traditional missions any longer, it is receiving an increasing number of accusations, as if it were guilty of the entire society's decline. Its image as a powerful institution has been gradually deteriorating and the falling trend is becoming more and more obvious as it is continually losing its historically gained rightfulness. Surprisingly, the efforts meant to produce desirable changes in the university functioning have contributed considerably to this loss due to associate perverse effects.

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