The Decentralization Strategy of Romanian Higher Education and the Implementation of Quality Management System

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Abstract: The paper points out the multiple and complex problems of decentralization in the academic domain in Romania. In accordance with the Bologna process, it highlights that for a real quality management system it is important to establish goals clearly. The paper also emphasizes the necessity to decide which form of decentralization would be undertaken for different functions. Another goal is to assess the institutional capacity of administrative levels that would be given responsibilities. At the same time, what is significant is to identify laws and regulations that would need to be modified in order to implement the reforms and to map out the links between different levels of government that are responsible for aspects of education. The paper emphasizes that the overall objective of decentralization is to contribute to assess potential gaps between the law and practice, to determine the best sequence of implementation in order to achieve greater effectiveness in the use of scarce resources.

Key Words: globalization, European integration, decentralization, reform of education, lifelong education, quality of education, equality of chances, management

1 Introduction

From the perspective of sustainable development and globalization of education to create the necessary pre-requirements to ensure quality education and efficient use of resources, decentralization is constituted in a dynamic approach that requires commitment and accountability on the one hand, and strategic thinking and control, on the other. A major problem of any contemporary reform of higher education is represented by the organization of the educational offer so as to match the diversification of the educational demands of students, in the circumstances of growing financial difficulties. The solution of organizing and reforming education from the perspective of permanent education appears to be a realistic one as it allows for the creation of certain flexible bridges between levels and routes of education [2].

A real reform of education has as a major aim the development of the free and creative personality, its social function being integration in social order and change. Such a reform starts from reality and from traditions, it secures equal chances of access to and success in education and it answers the challenges of contemporary world, of the new economies, based on computer technologies of communication, on knowledge and creativity. Thus it changes consumerist mentalities into creative attitudes. A challenge comes from the difficulty of achieving at the same time and to the same extent an equality of chances at the highest qualitative level of education. Another one comes from the processes of globalization and integration and it refers to the preserving of national identity and dignity, the development of national heritage, the assertion of the national creative spirit. The reform of education will have to take into account: the major aims of the social, economic, political projects, the needs and aspirations of young people, the cultural and pedagogical level of society, the resources of the system, the succession of stages in the logic of the reform [9].

The reforms in education must be a step in front of the economic ones - without being isolated from them - in order to develop the tendencies of stability and economic growth. If the revival of economic growth is a condition of a lasting social and educational development, the success of the education reform is a premise for the macro-structural economic reforms that primarily aim at the development of certain sectors (tertiary - from the sphere of services, health, education), new professions and jobs, new attitudes towards performance, competition, merit, risk, the new social middle class that encourages economic, social
Changes in education will be submitted to a triple impact: cultural traditions, the current problems of the world, the problems of the future. The reforms of education, by extending the duration of compulsory education, encourage the democratization of society as they reduce the dependence of the social position of a person on his/her social origin. From this perspective, the priorities of educational reforms are:

- the securing of equal chances of getting education,
- the improvement of the quality of education,
- the assertion of the organizing principle of continuous education - at all ages and along all alternative educational routes (formal, non-formal and informal).

If education doesn’t succeed as a factor increasing professionalism and stimulating the freedom of creation, then the costs will be higher as we will have to spend more on public services or the social protection of those who are not easily adaptable to social, professional and cultural integration. The problem of striking a balance between the demand for social and professional training and the educational offer will be solved both by prognoses about the labour force market and, mainly, by training extremely adaptable graduates (multiple skills).

The current trend in educational reform must be preserved and adjusted on the way, so that the process of European integration be a constant attribute of this approach [1]. In this context, the coordinates of future efforts might be:
- securing the equality of chances of getting education by a judicious organization of the education network, by a pluralist educational offer;
- eliminating the difficulties created by the inappropriate quality of economic infrastructure and local services, by the insufficiency and non-uniform distribution of funds, by the quality of the equipment and human resources;
- compensating the disadvantages created by the social and economic context in which the educational system operates, by restoring confidence and interest in the social and professional success through education;
- becoming part of the European Higher Education Area;
- realization of lifelong learning for all, with increased role of ICT.

Since October 2006 university accreditation issues are dealt with by the Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education. According to the information posted on the website of the Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education www.aracis.ro, there are 56 accredited public universities, 32 accredited private universities, and 23 institutions enjoying temporary accreditation.

2 The Social Dimension of the Bologna Process

The changes within higher education due to the Bologna Process require the restructuring of social support national system. In Romania the social dimension of the Bologna Process is shaped by state scholarships and grants (study and social grants, performance scholarships - excellence and merit scholarships, research grants), subsidized accommodation and meals, help with travelling expenses, support with health services. As member of the Bologna process, the Romanian Ministry of Education and Research included both in the National Reform Programme 2007-2010 and in the National Development Plan 2007-2013, as well as in the ministry strategy for 2006-2008 provisions on the development, implementation, updating and monitoring the National Qualifications Framework for Higher Education (NQFHE). Government Decision 1357/2005 provides for setting up ACPART as national authority for the development and regular update of the National Qualifications Framework for Higher Education. Here are several initiatives regarding the implementation of Bologna decisions in Romania:

- Design of National Qualifications Framework for Higher Education and development of the specific Methodology by ACPART, instruments which are compatible with the Overarching Framework for Qualifications of the EHEA and with the Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 23 April 2008;
- Universities interest and responsiveness to the implementation of a National Qualifications Framework for Higher Education, as sole instrument determining the structure of qualifications in higher education;
- Implementation of projects involving national and international institutions and bodies with responsibilities in the field of qualifications (funded by Leonardo da Vinci, Lifelong Learning, PHARE and ESF);
- National and international actions (conferences, seminars, international summer school UNISO
UNIversity in SOciety) organized by or involving participation of ACPART in order to develop and implement NQFHE efficiently and effectively;

- A number of university teaching staff involved in piloting the NQFHE Methodology prior to the DOCIS project and their availability to act as experts for the description of qualifications in higher education;

- Government Decision 890/2008 on the titles of qualifications and awards granted to graduates of Bachelor higher education studies enrolled in their first study year during academic years 2005-2006, 2006-2007, 2007-2008 and Ordinance 4868/07.08.2006 issued by the Minister of Education on the Diploma Supplement for the first Bologna graduates;


- Order no 4430/29.06.2009 issued by the Minister of Education, Research and Innovation on the implementation of the NQF in Higher Education

The Romanian higher education system has been in line with the Bologna Agreement. As a result, most Bachelor’s programs take 3 years to complete. However, some programs last longer for example, some technical fields, medicine and architecture. Master’s programs take 2 years beyond the Bachelor’s degree. Master’s programs are a prerequisite for admission to Ph.D. programs. Ph.D. programs usually take 3 years to complete. Under special circumstances, the duration of study may be extended by 1 or 2 years. In addition to budgetary scholarships and loans, students may receive private scholarships from employers to fully or partially cover their tuition fees and living expenses. In order to improve the access of students from rural areas to higher education, there are study scholarships awarded on the basis of the commitment to teach in rural education for a period of time at least equal to the duration of their studies. In order to assure an equal access for disadvantaged groups, Roma population may benefit at the university admission examination from 400 public budgetary places under the condition of fulfilling admission minimum criteria. Offering subsidies for non-residence halls accommodation was a helpful measure taken for solving the issue of student accommodation.

Since 2004 Romania has participated as observer to Eurostudent project, a monitoring system with regard to the socio-economic living conditions of higher education students in European Union countries [8]. This could easily develop to become an important instrument for Romania to provide valuable information for higher education policy. In Romania, Bologna strategies materialized through the following measures:

- The multiplication of efforts in view of ensuring quality particularly with higher education institutions and through a national body, in the context of European recommendations and evolutions.
- To elaborate a national framework of qualifications in correlation with studies on the labour market and compatible with the future European Qualifications Framework.
- Monitoring of graduates’ insertion within the labour market.
- A full operationalization of European transfer credit and accumulation system.
- The participation of Romania in programmes and actions aiming at the internationalization of higher education.

Equally Romanian higher education system has to cope with the following challenges:

- Candidates’ focus only on some higher education fields, which leads to a lack of correlation between higher education offer and current employment possibilities on the labour market;
- a possibility that employers fear the relevance of first degrees on labour market;
- the creation of new specializations in order to fulfill labour market demands;
- the massification of higher education which will have to lead to the development and improvement of quality assurance procedures and funding mechanism;
- insufficient contribution of the private sector to lifelong learning;
- adult’s low participation in lifelong learning;
- the creation of a better connection between the universities and socio-economic/cultural environment;
- the improvement of transfer mechanisms regarding scientific research outcomes.

## 2.1 Links with the European Qualifications Framework

- Memorandum on nominating the National Adult Training Board as the National Authority for Qualifications – NAQ/NATB signed by the Romanian Government in June 2004;

- Amendment and completion of Law 132/1999 by Law 559/December 7, 2004, adding to the NATB responsibilities the following: development and...
implementation of methodologies on the occupational analysis, qualifications and their validation, certification of professional competences and qualifications, development and update of the National Register for Qualifications;

- National Tripartite Agreement on the National Qualifications Framework signed by representatives of the Romanian Government (Ministry of Education and Research, Ministry of Economy and Commerce, Ministry of European Integration, Ministry of Public Finance, Ministry of Labour, Social Solidarity and Family), of employers and trade unions confederations, representative at national level (Bucharest, 23.02.2005);

- Common principles for quality assurance are applied in initial vocational education and training, according to the Overarching Framework for Qualifications of the EHEA;

- Mechanisms for validation of competences acquired in non-formal and informal contexts are operational in continuing vocational training.

2.2 Opportunities

- Involvement of all decision-makers in the description of qualifications, including employers;

- Students/graduates agree on the National Qualifications Framework as an instrument to match the universities provision with the labour market needs;

- Direct support of universities and other social partners for the development and implementation of the National Qualifications Framework for Higher Education;

- Description of qualifications in higher education in line with the descriptors used in the Overarching Framework for Qualifications of the EHEA;

- Ensuring transparency and visibility of the educational system at national level as well as comparability and compatibility with the European Higher Education Area;

- Facilitating lifelong learning, including after graduation of a Bachelor or Master’s study programme.

3 Aspects of Autonomy of Higher Education Institutions

University autonomy is fully guaranteed by the provisions of Romania’s Constitution, art.32 (6), which stipulates that “the autonomy of the Universities is guaranteed” and those of the Education Law no.84/1995 (Section 7), article 92 (2) academic autonomy refers to institutional management, structuring and operation, teaching and scientific research activities, administration and financing. It relies on the right of the university community to its own leadership and on its right to benefit from academic freedom without any political, ideological or religious constraints. It also relies on its right to assume a set of competencies and obligations in accordance with the national strategic directions set for the development of higher education, stipulated by the law [5]. The whole set of rights and obligations as well as the norms underlying the life of the university community are to be found in the University Chart adopted by the university senate, according to the law. Here are some of the most important:

3.1 Short and Long-cycle Higher Education

- State higher education is tax-free for the enrolment figure approved by the Government yearly which is financed from the national budget and tuition-fee based for the candidates who got a mark lower than that of the last successful candidate in the entrance examination. The enrolment figure for the candidates that pay tuition fees and the amount of the fees are established by the university senate. Even in the tax-free state higher education system, certain fees are required (for the extension of the duration of studies stipulated by the law, for the entrance examination, for registrations, for make-up examinations).

- Only baccalaureate diploma holders can sit in the entrance examination, the organization of the examination lying within the competence of each higher education institution. High school graduates who in the last two years at school got awards in the international school competitions, in arts or sporting competitions (European, world or Olympic) are registered in the university education system without having to go in for the entrance examination.

- In accordance with the stipulations of act 60 of April 24, 2000 regarding the rights of the graduates from the accredited private universities to go in for
3.2 Postgraduate Education

Postgraduate education includes: advanced studies (2-3 semester studies in the domain of specialization), master studies 2-4 semesters, they include several domains of specialization and end up with a dissertation), doctoral studies, postgraduate university studies, postgraduate specialized studies, postgraduate proficiency studies.

3.3 Higher Education Institutions and Students

Students participate in and influence the organization and content of education at universities and other higher education institutions at the national level. According to the Statute of Teaching Staff Law no. 128/1997 students are represented in the university senate (minimum 25%), elected according to the law. The executive administration of the university is assured by the University Senate Office composed by rector, vice-rectors, scientific secretary, administrative general director and a representative of students or students’ legal entities. The rector can invite at the Office meetings representatives of syndicates and students’ associations or any other stakeholders. In the Faculty Councils students are represented in a proportion of 1 out of 4.
At national level students’ associations are consulted by the ministry in each concern and regulation related to their status.

4 Scientific Research and University Autonomy

The institutions for higher education can organize and run units, centres of research, centres for preparing human resources, production units, other institutional structures; they can organize and unfold higher education programmes in cooperation with other similar institutions in the country or abroad.
The Education Act and other legal provisions insist on the components that define university autonomy: the deciding on the internal structure of the institution, the planning, organizing, improving of the educational process, the organizing of the entrance examination and the decision upon the criteria for the assessment of student’s performance, the planning and organizing of postgraduate studies, the selection and promotion of teaching staff, the establishing of the criteria for evaluating the latter’s results, the awarding of academic and scientific titles, the organizing of research, documentation, publishing activities, cooperation programmes, the election of the management bodies, the identification of the financial and material needs, the use and managing of financial resources, the awarding of scholarships, the setting up of foundations, the maintaining of order and discipline in the university areas [6].

5 The Involvement of Society in the Process of Decentralization

The provisions of the reform have extended communication with external factors, among which we can mention, the local councils and businesses, community factors. Through the new managerial and financial legislation that refers to the decentralization and autonomy of the educational units, the bases are laid for one of the fundamental objectives of reform in Romania [7]. In this respect we mention the principles of the decentralization process:
a) Public liability. All institutions and organizations
participating in the educational services regardless of their legal status, would be responsible, publicly, for the quality of education services offered, in relation to their functions and responsibilities.

b) Institutional autonomy. Decentralization will pursue the development of university institutional autonomy, of its ability to take relevant decisions.

c) Decision center is to be near the place of education act to make serious and responsible decisions.

d) Transparency of the decision which means everyone has access to public information.

e) Promotion of human resource. Teachers must be recognized as a key driver of development. Therefore, it will seek special attention to initial and ongoing training, and professional development of teachers.

f) The transfer and accountability in local decision-making in order to bring the decision closer to those who are directly interested in it.

g) Cultural and ethnic diversity. In the educational institutions, expression of elements of cultural identity of different social groups belonging to the community will be stimulated.

h) Ethical approach to educational services by adopting and enforcing codes of conduct for teaching staff, and for that of the control, quality assurance and management.

Given these principles, a greater responsibility and initiative in establishing the curriculum is necessary, in managing the extra-budgetary financial sources, as well as in the domain of selecting one’s own human resources.

The foundation for reform is the decentralization of authority from the government to the universities and inevitably the main thrust of this process is the transfer of financial responsibility - undoubtedly the most serious challenge facing the architects of the programme [4].

6 Conclusion

The education system in Romania has been subject to a series of reforms largely dictated by the political priorities of the party in power. No fewer than 15 major changes to the education system have been implemented by 13 ministers in the course of 20 years. Decentralization is not an end in itself. It is part of the national strategy of decentralization and it is intended to create an educational system organized, administered and financed by European rigors regarding the quality assurance in educational training process, unrestricted, equal of all in the educational activity. The effectiveness of decentralization should be included in value added in education attested by the ability to integrate young graduates in society on the basis of professional skills acquired and by employment locally, nationally and internationally. Decentralization should not cause imbalances and distortions in organization, leadership and support national education system. This process will ensure a clear division, balanced and well defined power of decision between representative institutions of local and regional communities, on the one hand, and the national level on the other.

Also, decentralization of decision involves the development of monitoring, control and evaluation, both by the local community and government institutions. The success of decentralization is based mainly on the balance between authority and responsibility on the one hand and the capacity of human resources and information flows, on the other.

References:


