

Romanian Higher Education in 2009–2013. The Bologna Process and Romanian Priorities in the Search for an Active European and Global Presence

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1 Introduction

In the recent years, higher education policy has attracted an increased attention both in Europe and beyond. This was partially due to its growing role in economic development through skills, knowledge and innovation, but also to the increasing diversification of missions, funding streams and delivery modes, which have made higher education one of the most important expanding service sectors in the society. Based on previous higher education systemic configurations and strategic endeavours, Romania has undergone significant reforms in the period 2009–2013, which are only now showing effects.

Against this background, the present volume is based on the research conducted in the frame of the ‘Higher Education Evidence Based Policy Making: a necessary premise

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for progress in Romania’ project, which was implemented by the Executive Agency for Higher Education, Research, Development and Innovation Funding (UEFISCDI) in the timeframe February 2012–February 2014 and was co-financed by the European Social Fund through the Operational Programme “Administrative Capacity Development”. The project aimed to increase the capacity of public administration for evidence-based policy making in the field of higher education, while focusing on good practices at international level and impact assessment. With the contribution of the national and international experts, the project has generated a number of studies on existing higher education public policies, such as: quality assurance, internationalisation, equity, student centred learning, transparency tools, data collection, the Bologna Process, financing of higher education and capacity building.

Numerous experts and policy makers participating in the project’s consultative events considered the project as very timely and adequate to the needs of the Romanian system. It was developed in a time in which information on the status-quo and impact of different policy options in various areas was highly needed, since the Law of National Education (Law 1/2011) needed to be complemented with a number of secondary legislative documents and strategies. Additionally, the themes analysed within various project components were also relevant for Romania’s positioning within various international policy processes, such as the Bologna Process and EU2020, especially in light of Romania’s commitment to formulate a higher education strategy for the 2014–2020 timeframe and the recent experience of Romania as a key player in the Bologna Process (host of the 2010–2012 Bologna Secretariat and organising the 2012 Bucharest Ministerial Conference and Bologna Policy Forum).

UEFISCDI brought its contribution to grounding Romanian higher education and research policy on solid evidence along the past decade, by enabling both practitioners and policy experts to exchange views in a larger frame of mutual learning and by attracting resources for strategic projects on various strands. The project on which the current research volume is based has been the last one in a series of initiatives described in greater detail in chapter III and its results are relevant for both national and international higher education communities and policy experts, as well as for the broad future direction of Romanian higher education.

The main aim of this research volume is thus to improve the information on Romanian higher education reforms through well documented analysis, as well as to formulate concrete evidence-based policy proposals, which could be transformed into future policy solutions in the Romanian higher education system.

2 Setting the Scene

2.1 Romanian Higher Education—Configurations and Imbalances (1990s–2007)

As with many other sectors, higher education in Romania has passed since 1990 through dramatic transformations following a radical change in the country’s

Evolution of total student numbers in Romania 1990-2011

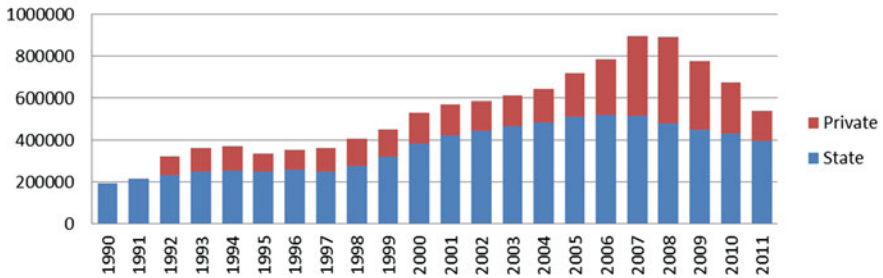


Fig. 1 The evolution of total student numbers in Romania (1990–2011) NIS “TEMPO online” data base

political and governance system. The transition from a highly centralized totalitarian regime to democratic governance has been marred by many problems.

The numbers of higher education institutions (HEIs) and the higher education participation rates have increased rapidly since 1990, together with a large diversification of specialized study programs offered by different institutions (Fig. 1). Such a wide post-1990 expansion followed on the dramatic constrictions imposed on higher education by the former communist regime.

The key axis of institutional diversification in the 1990s was the public/private one. As seen in the Fig. 2, the number of public institutions increased 2.5 times in 10 years, from 48 public HEIs in 1990 to 121 HEIs (out of which 58 were public and 63 private) in 2000. Private HEIs mushroomed and provided study programs mostly in social sciences and humanities. Public HEIs diversified also their study programs. Such a development responded mostly to a very high demand for higher education degrees coming from people coming from various walks of life. For responding to such a high demand and in connection with a lack of adequate public subsidies to higher education, candidates to higher education degrees followed the routes of both public and private higher education. Moreover, apart from the number of state subsidized study places, public higher education institutions were also allowed to deliver higher education programs while charging tuition fees like the private HEIs.

Change in the number of students (Fig. 3) was institutionally neither matched the evolution of teaching staff, nor with that of public funding (Table 1). Student/teacher ratio has been doubled, recruitment of young academic staff was almost put on hold, and teaching and curriculum innovations were delayed (Fig. 4).

Looking at how public financial support to higher education evolved (Table 1), one may see a clear lack of proportionate evolution in relation to the expansion of student numbers and number of higher education institutions. A smaller public pie was to be divided among an increasing number of beneficiaries.

According to Eurostat data, the risk of poverty and social exclusion fell from 45.9 % in 2007 to 40.3 % in 2011. Despite this significant progress, Romania is still

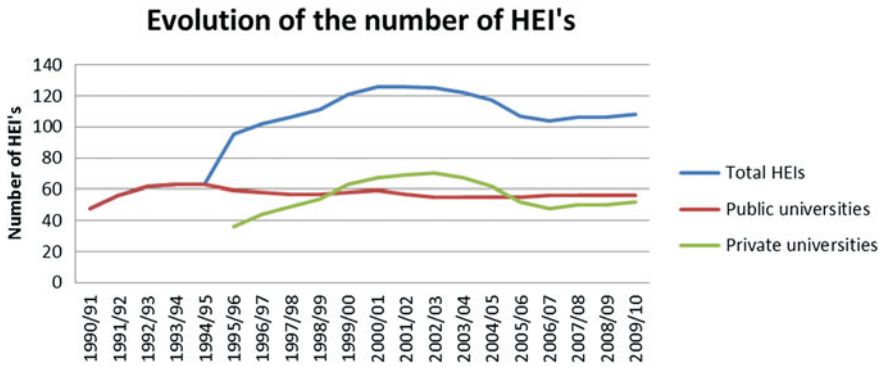


Fig. 2 The evolution of the total number of HEIs (1990–2010) NIS “TEMPO online” data base

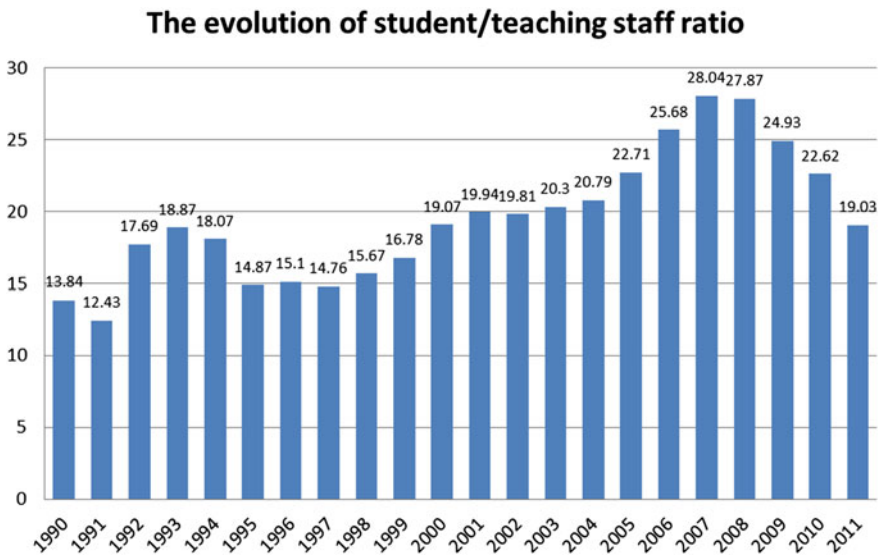


Fig. 3 The evolution of students/teaching staff ratio 1990–2011

among the countries with the highest rate of risk of poverty and social exclusion in Europe, almost twice as high as the EU average. Only Latvia and Bulgaria had higher poverty and social exclusion rates. In this sense, investment in higher education as a mean for social mobility becomes increasingly relevant.

Regarding access and equity, available data¹ show that the number of students accessing higher education has steadily decreased (especially in private HEIs), this being coupled with a decreasing number of students that passed the baccalaureate

¹ UEFISCDI “Equity in the Romanian Higher Education System” (UEFISCDI 2013).

Table 1 Public core funding in the 1999–2010 timeframe

Year	Total core funding (mil. RON) ¹	EUR (yearly average value exchange rate in lei) ²	GDP Volume (mld. euro) ³	Core funding share in GDP
2003	633.15	3.76	52.60	0.32
2004	847.26	4.05	60.80	0.34
2005	1,041.24	3.62	79.50	0.36
2006	1,175.35	3.52	97.70	0.34
2007	1,680.73	3.34	123.70	0.41
2008	1,947.30	3.68	139.70	0.38
2009	1,950.04	4.24	118.20	0.39
2010	1,908.68	4.21	124.40	0.36
2011	1,710.61	4.24	131.30	0.31
2012	1,675.28	4.46	132.00	0.28

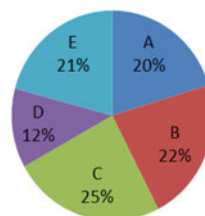
¹ National Council for Financing Higher Education (CNFIS) 2012 Report (www.cnfis.ro)

² National Bank of Romania Exchange rate (www.bnro.ro)

³ National Institute of Statistics (NIS)—Tempo online (PIB Production method current prices)

Fig. 4 The breakdown of higher education programmes into the five specific ranks

Higher Education study programmes breakdown



(57 % in 2012). The participation of under-represented groups has been preserved at a very low level. Only 3.8 % of young people aged 25–29 from the 20 % of the poorest family backgrounds have graduated one cycle of higher education compared to 52.4 % of the top 20 % affluent sector (World Bank 2011). As for the youth from a rural background, the number of students has decreased by approximately 10 % in 2007–2011 (Institute of Educational Sciences 2012). According to the National Institute for Statistics (NIS), at the beginning of the 2011–2012 academic year there were only 333 disabled students in the overall Romanian higher education system (out of total 539.852 students). Moreover, ethnically disadvantaged groups have had a very low chance of participating in higher education. For instance, less than 1 % of the Roma population graduated higher education since 1990.

Regarding the internationalization of higher education, “after the events in 1989 and the collapse of the communist regime, the foreign (students) interest in Romania began to rise again, but the apathy of public authorities and of universities

led to a decrease in Romania's importance on the international higher education market." (Pricopie 2004).

Due to the European student exchange programs implemented following the late 1990s, the number of incoming mobile students to Romania is two to four times smaller than the number of outgoing students,² the size of the imbalance depending on the mobility type and duration. At the level of the EHEA, Romania is seen as a 'closed system' (EHEA 2012), with low incoming and low outgoing student numbers comparative to other countries.

The creation of a **new legislative framework** for higher education has passed through several stages. At the very beginning of the 1990, amendments to the communist legislation were made, while new legal initiatives liberalized and democratized the system. In 1993 the legal framework for accrediting higher education institutions and the procedure for diplomas recognition were established (Law 88/1993 amended through Law 144/1999) together with the creation of the National Council on Academic Evaluation and Accreditation (CNEAA) the precursor of the Agency for Quality Assurance in Romania (ARACIS), which also set national accreditation standards for higher education providers.

The autonomy of university was instituted after 1990, primarily by the Romania's constitutional acts, which guaranteed university autonomy, and then by the first comprehensive law of education adopted in 1995 (Law 84/1995). Higher education institutions have been granted the autonomous rights to establish and implement their own development policies. However, for certain aspects (such as the personnel and financial policies) the autonomy of universities was still limited. Such restrictions on university autonomy have had ever since negative consequences on higher education. For instance, according to a Joint Report of the European Commission (European Commission: Directorate-General for Economic and Financial Affairs—Economic Policy Committee 2010), Romanian policies regarding higher education staff have caused a 'relatively low absorption of young teachers and a lack of flexibility in terms of recruitment'.

After 1999, a new public financing mechanism for higher education was implemented, based on block grants and bilateral contracts between the Ministry of Education and the higher education institutions and with a component calculated on a cost-differentiated per student capita formula (Ministry of National Education: National Council for financing Higher Education 1999). Thus, the two pillars of the public funding formula were: (1) "*block grants*" allotted according to a per capita cost-differentiation formula, as the main part of the overall universities' public funding, and (2) "*differential financing*" of universities (introduced in 2002), based on a qualitative component (i.e. calculated by considering qualitative indicators which were updated regularly). Public funds have been allotted by applying a per

² Data from the data collection process conducted in 2011 in order to assess and classify universities and study programs

<http://uefiscdi.gov.ro/articole/2535/Clasificare-universitati-si-ierarhizare-programe-de-studii.html>

capita formula and a section of overall public sum allotted to universities, which varied over time, was disbursed according to a series of qualitative indicators.

Introduced in 2002, the qualitative component (based on process and input indicators) of the financing formula was constantly developed and the percentage of the overall university financing allotted according to qualitative criteria increased every year, reaching up to 30 % in 2010. However, the relevance of such criteria proved to be very low when considering the need for institutional differentiation.

Another milestone in the development of the Romanian Higher Education system was its becoming part of the Bologna Process. Romania signed the Bologna Declaration in 1999. Various steps towards implementing the principles and objectives of the Bologna Process have been taken by individual universities, while in 2004 specific legislation was adopted and national-wide measures towards the implementation of Bologna Process were taken. Since 2005, higher education study programmes have been organized into three cycles: first cycle (Licence/Bachelor), second cycle (Master) and third cycle (PhD, Doctorate), as provisioned by Law 288/2004. Also, the ECTS and the diploma supplement have been introduced as mandatory elements for each university.

One of the main achievements of the Romanian higher education, with a view to becoming an active and attractive part of the European Higher Education Area, was the adoption of the Law 87/2006 on quality assurance in education. This law has a trans-sector approach to quality assurance, covering all the education service providers in Romania. The Law on quality assurance in education includes:

- Methodological principles for quality assurance/accreditation in higher education;
- External quality review procedures and criteria for institutions and programmes level;
- Quality assurance at institutional level (Internal QA guidelines);
- Institutional arrangements involved in quality assurance.

The Law also provides the establishment of the Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ARACIS) as an independent public institution with competences in accreditation, quality review and quality assurance.

2.2 Main National Changes to the HE System After 2007

When considering various policy reforms in Romania, it seems to be unavoidable noticing that higher education was one of the areas with many hectic debates, mostly focused on its legal provisions, despite the fact that legal changes do not immediately induce variations in practice or mentality. For instance, since the 1995 Education Law was adopted it passed through continuous amendments thus arriving in 2005 to have more changes than actual articles.

By 2006, a Presidential Commission, appointed by the President of Romania, was expected to change the overall approach. The Commission was expected to

primarily make an analytical and comparative diagnosis of the state of the national research and higher education system within the European context, while also identifying ways and means of eliminating the already emerged imbalances and shortcomings. The Commission issued the report “Education and Research in Romania” (Presidential Commission 2007) and submitted it to public debate. The report was concluded with the statement that the higher education and research systems were in need of far reaching and substantial reforms and modernization and that these may stand a good chance of being successfully implemented as long as they would bring together not just researchers and academics but also as many stakeholders as possible. Following on the public debates, a ‘**National Pact for Education**’, as a political document endorsed by all political parties and key stakeholders, was adopted. Based on the analysis and the pact, a reform strategy —“Education and Research for the Knowledge Society” (Presidential Commission 2008)—was developed and agreed with the key stakeholders.

The *National Pact for Education* set ambitious objectives to be reached by 2013 such as curricular reform, improvements in the management of higher education institutions, full university autonomy, classification of universities by their mission statements and achievements and ranking of study programs (connected with the financing system), introducing student charter, improving equity in higher education and lifelong learning programs, as a basis for increasing participation rates in higher education.

Such policy documents were then considered as offering the grounds for adopting a new law in education and research, in order to generate the legal framework that would facilitate new developments and corresponding competitive outcomes in higher education.

The arguments used to underline the need for a new education law were given by all the above-mentioned documents. The arguments were:

- *The need for excellence in Higher Education.* This need was based on the identified “mediocrity of the Romanian Higher Education System”, as “no Romanian university had reached the top 500 in the Shanghai world ranking or high positions in other world or European rankings”³ and since HEIs were seen as failing to fully meet the needs for local and national development in terms of skills, knowledge and innovation;
- *The need to increase scientific production* in order to become more competitive (by reaching at least the EU average indicators);
- *The uniformity or lack of diversification of universities in the system*, as all universities in the country, public or private, considered themselves as institutions with both higher education and research missions, according to their university charters, while failing to factually demonstrate appropriate performances in either of the two areas;

³ <http://www.shanghairanking.com/>

- Due to the uniformity of universities, *public funding was also highly uniform* with little incentive for improving quality of education and/or research outcomes (mainly due to the funding formula).
- *The lack of university autonomy. Previous human resource policies* had negative effect on employment and promotion and consequently on the performance of universities.
- *The inefficiency of the collegial management system of Romanian universities.*
- *The need for a more student centred approach*, as students were deemed to be partners in the educational process.
- *The inequity of the higher education system* in view of the low participation rates for students from rural areas, from different disadvantaged groups etc.

The new **National Education Law** was adopted on the 5th of January 2011 and included a set of provisions that targeted the above-mentioned perceived flaws of the Romanian higher education system. In what follows, we will look at how these provisions are foreseen in the new law, as well as how they were operationalized in practice.

Regarding the need for excellence in Higher Education, one of the elements operationalized in the law were the *incentives for university consortia*, as an important step to enhance the effectiveness of the university management and to increase the institutional capacity in order eventually to be better positioned for serving stakeholders expectations and in international rankings. Even though university consortia and university mergers were encouraged, in order to reach an institutional critical mass and improve the management of resources and quality of higher education, by 2013, only two universities decided to merge on a voluntary basis, although the demographic decline of young cohorts is expected to reach its peak by 2015.

With the need to increase the scientific production, provisions related to research were also introduced in the law, having a better positioning in international rankings as a main goal. As a consequence, the law included a new approach regarding doctoral studies, and made research criteria highly prominent when assessing staff and institutional academic excellence. In the same vein, excellence is highly supported through different incentives in the law. Two types of doctoral education were introduced: the research doctorate—with the objective to produce scientifically relevant knowledge at international level, eligible only for full time studies (its completion being also a precondition for achieving an academic career within higher education institutions) and the professional doctorate—aimed at producing knowledge by applying scientific methods and systematic reflections over a set of national and international standards. The reform of the doctoral cycle has not yet been finalized.

Also, in order to tackle the problem regarding the lack of diversification or uniformity of universities, the idea of differentiation of higher education institutions and of their provision was introduced in the law by means of a university classification mechanism. Institutional diversification was so proposed as to differentiate between three categories: advanced research universities; teaching and research universities and teaching oriented universities. The university classification was to

be based on output criteria and performed every four years. The classification process envisaged two stages. The first was “*the identification stage*” in which each university was invited to identify and assume its own mission, as well as provide data and information, which would substantiate that mission. Subsequently, the processed data and information would then generate institutional classes. The second stage—“*the consolidation stage*” included an institutional evaluation to be undertaken in order to assess and help enhance institutional quality provision, within the context of each university’s mission and the various different classes that have been identified.

Following this regulation, the first classification process was done in 2012⁴ and became the first indirect visible result that the law produced. The results of this first classification exercise showed that there were 12 research-intensive universities, 30 teaching and research universities and 48 teaching universities in the Romanian higher education system at that point in time.

The independent Institutional Evaluation Programme (IEP) of the European University Association (EUA) was selected to undertake a system-level evaluation process, as part of a project carried out with the Romanian Executive Agency for Higher Education, Research, Development and Innovation Funding (UEFI-SCDI). Using the IEP guidelines, each volunteering institution was evaluated by a team of international experts—including university leaders, as well as students, and higher education professionals—all from outside Romania. The evaluations focused on a broad range of issues such as institutional mission and how this relates to the classification exercise, supporting quality provision, quality assurance mechanisms and strategic management. The project is due to be finalized in 2014 and all evaluation reports are publicly available.

The ranking of study programmes was also performed, within the same data collection process as the classification. This process aimed to provide information to potential beneficiaries with regard to the level of academic quality provision in the areas of teaching, research, student services, community services and internationalization. The process included two main stages: data gathering based on the inputs from the higher education institutions themselves in a standard format and institutional evaluation—the IEP. The evaluation comprised 1,074 study programmes from 59 study domains that were divided in five specific types (A > B > C > D > E, where > meant better results than).

An important note on this topic is the fact that the process was highly contested by stakeholders. The methodology of data processing on which universities were evaluated was not made public, as well as the relationship between different criteria in establishing the class or rank. In this context, the processes of classification of universities and ranking of study programmes were contested and suspended in court. No new university classification or ranking of study process has been conducted since.

⁴ <http://chestionar.uefiscdi.ro/>

Regarding the public funding of universities, the law introduced different types of financing depending on their objectives such as: core financing, complementary financing, institutional development financing, etc. The core financing of universities should, according to Law 1/2011, take into account the results of the classification exercise and the different ranking processes. Since the results of the university classification and study programmes ranking were brought into question with the court decision, the link between these instruments and the funding methodology was not kept. Moreover, even if the law stipulated other forms of disbursing higher education funding, such as institutional development financing that were not influenced by the classification, the subsequent methodologies were not developed or implemented by the end of 2013.

In order to increase university autonomy and public responsibility, the law proposed that universities should establish their own mission, institutional development strategy, curricula design and implementation, quality assurance mechanisms, as well as financial and human resources management. Moreover, universities should be provided with financial incentives to establish start-ups and business incubators so as to encourage students and academics to develop their entrepreneurial skills. Even so, the universities still have to comply with other regulations that influence these actions, such as: the status of academic staff, which still includes provisions similar to those applicable to civil servants; complying with the standards from the Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ARACIS) and with financial regulations for public funds.

Regarding the recruitment and pre-service training of students for a teacher career in pre-university education, the Law of Education aimed to promote specific facilities for encouraging the following of a teaching career in pre-university education by financing undergraduates applying for a master's degree in education. The development of such a master programme envisaged several components: theoretical development provided by special university accredited study programs; a two years master's degree in teaching; a practical teaching period for one year within an educational unit under the supervision of a teacher, with the role of a mentor.

By the end of 2013 the practices regarding the development of the teaching staff were not changed, as the "study programmes" for teachers remained the same, no master programme in teaching was developed and the implementation of these regulations were postponed.

When looking at the collegial leadership system of Romanian universities, the law introduced an alternative (more managerial in nature) and allowed academic communities to democratically choose what type of leadership they want. As a consequence, all Romanian universities chose the collegial leadership system.

Regarding the implementation of the *Student Centred Learning approach*, the law recognized that students are considered partners in the HEIs and equal members of the academic community and introduced a code of students' rights and responsibilities, proposed by the national students' associations and approved by Ministerial Decision, but at the same time, the participation of students in the process of electing the university rector was diminished.

Related to equity, new instruments were introduced in the law, aiming at increasing equitable access to higher education: a student loan system, addressing students coming from low-income families, a special fund for student inclusion, scholarships and students social protection, disbursed to universities based on a competition, as well as the legal possibility for universities to distribute the budgeted places on social criteria. However, the loan system is not currently in place. The lack of initial financial investment of the state, the small amounts of the loans set by the law, and the lack of debates in the academic community regarding its usefulness could be arguments for which the authors consider that this action is still not implemented. The specific fund has no allocation procedures adopted at the national level and has therefore never been distributed to universities. Regarding the new procedures for grants allocation, from the total number of public universities, fewer than five universities have already integrated in their procedure the allocation of grant on social criteria.

Looking at the development of the Romanian higher education since 2007, it is evident that a number of reforms were started, but some of them still need development of subsequent legal documents, based on coherent policies and sound research and impact assessments. The following section will underline the history of grounding national policies on various types of research and capacity building projects, as well as how international organisations or institutions played a role in this context.

3 Evidence-Based Decisions and Subsequent Legal Changes in the National Setting

As in any new democracy, capacity had to be built in the Romanian higher education sector after the fall of the communist regime in 1989. Apart from legal changes, state authorities and higher education institutions needed to build capacity for designing, implementing and assessing public policies, as well as for in-depth analysis and research to ground decision-making. Both national institutions and international bodies (such as the World Bank, the European Commission, UNESCO-CEPES) worked together to develop projects and analysis on which major policy changes were grounded and that also increased the ability of the system to implement agreed reforms.

The next section aims at introducing two case studies—one referring to an international organization, the World Bank, as well as its influence and contribution to higher education reform in Romania—and a second case study looking at the role of UEFISCDI, as a national actor that used pre-accession and structural EU funds to develop a body of knowledge and increase capacity in the Romanian higher education and research sectors.

3.1 The Role of the World Bank in Romanian Higher Education Reform

The World Bank has been actively following the evolution of Romania since the 1970s, when significant loans were granted to the Ceausescu regime. However, the World Bank has been mostly active as a lender in Romania since 1991; from the total of the World Bank's 30 projects in Romania, totalling around US\$3 billion, around 21 projects, amounting to US\$1 billion, were in operation in 2002. A US \$300 million loan was negotiated by the Romanian authorities with the World Bank in 2002 (the Second Private Sector Adjustment Loan). The understanding was that Romania would: reform and privatise the financial sector, privatise state-owned enterprises, stimulate the business environment and cut the costs of the social sector (Ginsburg 2005).

In post-communist times, the World Bank's influence in the higher education sector started to be visible in 1991, when an external evaluation of the Romanian Education System, based on a Japanese grant, was conducted. Subsequently, a confidential report was presented and discussed in the Romanian Parliament in December 1992. The World Bank argued then for a more professional management of the higher education sector, for a restructuring of the financing system with a view of abolishing the idea of 'education free of charge' and for enhancing equity of the system by fostering access for 'talented, but needy students' (Romanian Parliament 2002–2005).

Based on a preparatory negotiation phase (1994–1995), the Reform of Higher Education and Research Project RO—4096 (1996–2002) was implemented by the Romanian Government.⁵ The total budget amounted to USD 84 million, which came from three sources:

- a grant from the European Union in total amount of USD 9.6 million;
- a loan from the World Bank in total amount of USD 50 million;
- a Government contribution of USD 24.4 million.

Components II and III of this Project constituted a major strand of the Government strategy of developing higher education, and included three main areas of development:

- diversification of higher education system;
- introduction of new areas and developing the existing ones, according to the market economy demands;
- an increase in academic performance and the introduction of modern teaching and learning methods.

The project had, *inter alia*, the following aims: an increase of student expenditure in both public and private higher education provision, an increase of 25 % by 2000

⁵ <http://ro4096.uefiscsu.ro/>

of private HE enrolment, an increase to at least 30 % of the total funding for recurrent expenditures of private financing by 1998/99 and an increase in cost recovery from students as a proportion of private financing in public higher education (World Bank 1996).

In light of the major impacts of this project over higher education in Romania, it was considered similar to a “Marshall Plan” for higher education in the 1990s (Damian 2011). The results of this large-scale reform project were already visible in 1999, when Romania signed the Bologna Declaration and started preparing to align its higher education system to the commitments made in the European Higher Education Area.

In view of the large-scale massification of higher education and the limited public resources to invest in this sector, which caused inequities in the system, in 2008, the World Bank developed in collaboration with the Ministry of Education a report regarding the possibility to introduce a student loan scheme. This report included an analysis based on statistical data, as well as conclusions formulated following three rounds of discussions with approximately 140 participants in dedicated workshops. As a conclusion of this report, the expert team advised the creation of a loan scheme that would increase higher education accessibility, introduce co-sharing for both tuition and living costs and influence the behaviour of graduates, according to the interest of the Government. A number of more specific technical recommendations were also made. (World Bank and Ministry of Education, Research and Youth 2008) As a follow-up of the project, the student loan is foreseen in Law 1/2011 and an Agency for Student Loans and Scholarships was created, but currently the loan system is not functional.

Taking into account the brief description of the major initiatives developed in cooperation with the World Bank it is clear that, along with other important international players in higher education, the World Bank had a decisive influence on higher education reform in Romania. This influence was manifest in the last decades with a clear concentration in the 1990s, both in terms of diffusion of ideas, as well as regarding financial support and capacity building.

3.2 Strategic Projects for Higher Education: Providing Evidence for Decision-Makers

In addition to the influence of international players, the Romanian higher education system also developed by using the expertise and policy ownership given by various large scale projects. UEFISCDI was one of the public institutions intensely involved in enabling Romanian academic communities to participate in policy design and evaluation via a series of projects, supported by European funds.

In 2008, a year after Romania became a EU member, most of the European Social Fund—Operational Programmes for the 2007–2013 timeframe—were launched in accordance with the National Development Plan (Government of Romania 2005) and the National Strategic Reference Framework (Government of

Romania 2007). The vision of those programmes was to contribute to Romania becoming more competitive, dynamic and prosperous; they had the objective to reduce the economic and social development disparities between Romania and other EU Member States.

One of the Operational Programmes under the “Convergence Objective” was the “Sectorial Operational Programme Human Resources Development (SOP-HRD)” with the general objective aiming at the development of human capital and increasing competitiveness, by linking education and lifelong learning with the labour market and ensuring increased opportunities for future participation on a modern, flexible and inclusive labour market for 1,650,000 people. The specific objectives included inter alia: promoting quality initial and continuous education and training, including higher education and research; promoting entrepreneurial culture and improving quality and productivity at work; facilitating access to education and to the labour market of the vulnerable groups.

As a result of these EU membership generated funding opportunities, the Executive Agency for Higher Education, Research, Development and Innovation Funding (UEFISCDI) implemented eleven strategic projects aimed at providing support for the decision makers regarding the reform of the higher education system.

The first wave of projects implemented between 2008 and 2012 was based on the results of the previous projects that underlined the most relevant areas that needed further work, for example the projects developed in partnership with the World Bank, or funded through PHARE or TEMPUS EU funds.

These projects, and the projects that followed, created the premise for policy developments and shaped the debates on the higher education arena by: providing evidence based policy options through system-level analysis, creating an environment for debate with different stakeholders, international experts and decision makers, offering different perspectives for the future of the Romanian higher education system and by developing different instruments for the use of the academic community.

In particular, in one of the projects⁶ a comprehensive analysis of Romanian higher education landscape was developed. Based on the project activities, a set of strategic documents were also developed, such as:

- a vision regarding the Romanian Higher Education in 2025 and a White Paper for Quality and Leadership in Romanian Higher Education in 2015, that offered a way forward when thinking about future policies (for example the importance of Student Centred Learning, university differentiation and excellence, transparency tools and data regarding HE);
- a Blueprint for Organizing Foresight in Universities for improving policy decisions;
- a report regarding the possible differentiation of universities;

⁶ “Quality and Leadership for Romanian Higher Education: Charting the Future of our Society” Project - www.edu2025.ro

- a set of platforms that were meant to offer real instruments to all stakeholders in order to improve their activity.

University leadership was also targeted with these strategic projects. One of the key elements for increasing the ability of university leadership to enhance its strategic outlook was the construction and implementation of a system of adequate training for the universities representatives⁷ with different decisional responsibilities (considered to be the first national policy that targeted university leaders).

In order for these activities to rely on realistic information, UEFISCDI developed the National Student Enrolment Registry⁸ project, whose main goal was to conduct for the first time an analysis on data collection for higher education. A platform for the national student enrolment registry was developed and piloted. Additionally, a discussion on how data regarding students should be collected/used was started, which opened the path for further projects that aim at developing a unique data collection system for the higher education system.

In order to raise quality and relevance of higher education, an analysis was developed⁹ to see the extent to which the acquired knowledge allows the graduates to be employed on the labour market, to develop their own business or to continue higher education studies at the next level.

A second wave of projects was considered an important instrument for assisting policy reforms in connection with the new law of education.

In that context, the projects “Quality and diversity in Romanian Universities”¹⁰ and “Performance in the Romanian Higher Education”¹¹ were developed in connection with the national process of evaluating universities. Romanian higher education institutions were involved in a mutual learning experience with international quality assurance experts, in an exercise developed in partnership with the European University Association and its Institutional Evaluation Programme.

Another contribution to the implementation of the Education Law was the project “Quality Assurance in higher education through habilitation and audit”,¹² which aimed at creating the methodological framework for the habilitation of professors (that involved the right to coordinate PhD students), the audit and evaluation of human resources.

A second structural funds type of programme that targeted higher education is the Operational Programme ‘Administrative Capacity Development’ 2007–2013, which had as an objective to contribute to the creation of a more efficient and effective public administration for the socio-economic benefit of Romanian society (Ministry Of Interior and Administrative Reform 2007) UEFISCDI is currently implementing under this operational programme a third wave of projects. The first

⁷ “Improving University Management” - www.management-universitar.ro

⁸ “The National Student Enrollment Registry” - www.rmu.ro

⁹ “University Graduates and Labor Market: Romanian Tracer Study” - www.absolvent-univ.ro

¹⁰ “Quality and diversity in Romanian Universities” - www.pc.forhe.ro

¹¹ “Performance in the Romanian Higher Education” - www.pc.forhe.ro

¹² “Quality Assurance in higher education thru habilitation and audit” - www.aer.forhe.ro

project, “Higher Education Evidence Based Policy Making: a necessary premise for progress in Romania”, on which the present research volume is based,¹³ aims to increase the capacity of public administration for evidence-based policy making in the field of higher education. This project was mainly driven by the experience and expertise stemming from Romania’s initiative to host the Bologna Secretariat in the 2010–2012 timeframe and to organise the Bucharest EHEA Ministerial Conference and Third Bologna Policy Forum.¹⁴ Among the above mentioned project’s main goals, we find an analysis of the current data flows in higher education between different institutions, which includes recommendations for the data collection system improvement and the development of an integrated online system of data collection aimed at replacing the current repeated flows. The project also included comprehensive studies regarding the implementation of the current policies within the Bologna Process, with a focus on equity, internationalization, and internal quality assurance and with detailed recommendations for these specific areas. Research articles and even full fledged publications have resulted from this project already or are forthcoming, such as a study regarding the implementation of the Bologna Action lines in the Romanian higher education landscape, to be published by CEU Press in 2014 and the present volume.

One of other projects that started in 2013 aims to prepare the necessary conditions for transition to the national e-Administration system, in order to create a more efficient and effective public administration for the social-economic benefit of the Romanian society. The other project stated in 2013 is aiming at increasing capacity for strategic planning of the Research, Development and Innovation (RDI) sector, to meet the short, medium and long term strategic needs of Romanian socio-economic development.

All these projects have been built on results of previous such initiatives and have tried to build on existing capacities, knowledge and to enhance the exchange of expertise with hundreds of external experts. The impact of these projects has been recognized either by members of the academic communities via capacity building indicators or by national authorities by including policy solutions suggested by various projects in national legislation or strategies.

3.3 Strategic Projects for Research and Innovation in the Higher Education Context

Looking at research and innovation in the Higher Education context, the influence of some strategic projects can be easily seen, as UEFISCDI apart from two projects aimed at the development of the third cycle and young researchers developed the

¹³ “Higher Education Evidence Based Policy Making: a necessary premise for progress in Romania” - www.politici-edu.ro

¹⁴ <http://www.ehea.info/news-details.aspx?ArticleId=102>

only two national strategies: the strategy for research and innovation 2007–2013¹⁵ and the National Strategy for Research, Technological Development and Innovation 2014–2020.¹⁶

Regarding higher education research, the ‘Doctorate in universities of excellence’ project¹⁷ aimed to train young researchers from universities in view of developing, transferring and re-evaluating the scientific knowledge. Specific criteria, methodologies, indicators and a specialized online platform were developed and piloted in order to improve the quality of research in universities through proper evaluation. This project started national debates regarding the possibility of introducing excellence programmes in Romanian universities and tried to improve the editorial capacity of the Romanian ISI scientific publications.

Another project¹⁸ also managed to develop a diagnosis regarding doctoral schools on thematic fields at the national level and proposed a new model of Doctoral Schools.

As a possible consequence, the future policies regarding the reform of the third cycle were also based on these findings and some of the key areas, such as the Romanian ISI scientific publication or research evaluations, have increased in quality and numbers.

Moreover, Romania assumed an active role at the European level by co-chairing the BFUG WG on the third cycle which aims at providing recommendations/policy proposals to the Education Ministers in areas such as: quality assurance, transparency tools, internationalization and mobility, employability and the third cycle.

4 Romania’s Role in the International Context— Key-Player on the Rise?

Apart from being influenced by various international processes and actors, Romania also became increasingly visible in the international arena in the past decade. It assumed various roles as a country and representatives of higher education stakeholders were increasingly present in European level stakeholder organisations. This dimension is interesting to study, in order to capture how much of the national policy debates were simply downloaded from European or international arenas and how much Romania managed to ‘upload’ some of its policy priorities at European or international level.

Bucharest became the centre of higher education in Central and Eastern Europe with the set-up of UNESCO CEPES (European Centre for Higher Education) in September 1972, which aimed at promoting co-operation in higher education

¹⁵ www.strategie-cdi.ro

¹⁶ www.cdi2020.ro

¹⁷ “Doctorate in Universities of Excellence” - www.ecs-univ.ro

¹⁸ “Doctoral Studies in Romania: Organization of Doctoral Schools” - www.studii-doctorale.ro

among Member States of the Europe Region (the countries of Europe, North America, and Israel). The activities of UNESCO-CEPES were focused foremost on higher education in Central and Eastern Europe. In the timeframe September 2003–December 2010, UNESCO-CEPES has been a consultative member of a Follow-up Group of the Bologna Process.

UNESCO CEPES was tasked with undertaking projects relevant to the development and reform of higher education, especially in view of the UNESCO World Conference on Higher Education (1998) and the Bologna Process, as well as to provide consultancy, disseminate information, promote policy developments, act as a capacity builder before and especially after the 1989 revolutions, as well as act as co-secretariat of specialized networks, especially of those related to the implementation of the Council of Europe/UNESCO Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications Concerning Higher Education in the Europe Region.

Due to the concentration of specialized staff and information in UNESCO CEPES, Romania was always connected and active to international developments. UNESCO CEPES was led by the current Secretary General of EUA, Lesley Wilson, who acted as Director of the Center between 1995 and 1999. In 2009, The Romanian Government hosted the UNESCO Forum on Higher Education in the Europe Region: Access, Values, Quality, and Competitiveness, which took place in Bucharest, Romania (22–24 May 2009). The meeting was co-organized by UNESCO's European Centre for Higher Education (UNESCO-CEPES) and the Ministry of Education on behalf of the Government of Romania, and in collaboration with the Council of Europe, the European Commission, OECD, the European University Association (EUA), the European Students' Union (ESU) and Education International (EI) as well as the Observatory of the Magna Charta Universitatum and the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD).

The Forum reunited government officials, institutions of higher education, intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations and discussed trends and the further development of higher education foremost in the Europe Region (Europe, North America and Israel). The work of the Forum was based on the report entitled *Ten Years Back and Ten Years Forward: Developments and Trends in Higher Education in Europe Region* (Usher 2009) as well as thematic papers on four key topics—access, values, quality, and competitiveness, which were identified as being of strategic importance and regional relevance and which were prepared by top-level experts in the respective areas. In addition, the challenges of internationalization of higher education in a globalizing world were discussed as a transversal theme. The Forum concluded with the *Bucharest Message to the 2009 UNESCO World Conference on Higher Education* (UNESCO 2009). The ideas reflected in this document were also found in the UNESCO WCHE+10 Communiqué to be adopted in July 2009 in Paris and reflected in the debates around different drafts of the Law on National Education (Law 1/2011).

Romania was also heavily involved in the policy negotiations prior to the adoption of the April 2012 EHEA Bucharest Communiqué, as the Vice-chair of the BFUG and the host of the Bologna Secretariat. Romania hosted the first Ministerial Conference in the 'consolidation' phase of the Bologna Process, as well as the third

Bologna Policy Forum, on 26–27 April 2012 where more than 70 ministerial delegations from around the world were present. In the run-up to the Ministerial Conference, Romania supported, inter alia, a set of key ideas which were prominent in the national environment and on which Law 1/2011 was based: more effective governance, transparency, university mission diversification and more diversified university financing. Romania also supported EUA in the push for more links between the EHEA and the European Research Area and proposed the set-up of a voluntary peer learning and review system across the EHEA that would provide an impetus for more exchange of good practice and experience between EHEA countries, but also between higher education institutions. If one looks at the precedence of the adoption of Law 1/2011 and at the persons involved in the BFUG negotiations, it is clear that Romania assumed a role of ‘policy upload’ of national priorities into European processes. Also, Romania opted for an innovative approach with regard to the management of the existing Bologna Process documents, by creating a permanent EHEA website¹⁹ and an EHEA archive²⁰ that reunited all public documents since the inception of this longstanding Pan-European policy coordination process.

A further proof in that direction is the organisation in the context of the UEFISCDI structural projects, in October 2011, of the Bologna Process Researchers’ Conference,²¹ an event which gathered over 200 scholars from more than 30 countries looking at recent higher education policy reforms in general and the Bologna Process in particular. The results of this conference fed into the proceedings of the ministerial debates and materialized into a two volumes of research articles,²² creating a link between researchers and policy. The General Rapporteur of the Researchers Conference, conveyed the key messages from the research community during the Bucharest Ministerial Meeting itself.

Romania is currently involved in all BFUG structures as a member and acts as a Co-Chair of the EHEA Working Group (WG) on the Third Cycle within the Bologna Process, together with Spain and Italy.

Since 2007, Romania is also part of all EU policy debates and is now working closely with the European Commission and the World Bank to design several strategies aimed at pinpointing the priorities for specific sectors, including higher education, lifelong learning and research. Also, currently Romania is an OECD observatory member. One specific example to illustrate Romania’s role in recent European debates is the UEFISCDI initiative to publish a forthcoming research volume with an innovative character, which will provide both national overviews and specific case studies of mergers and alliances of higher education institutions over the last decade. This volume will follow in the series of research volumes on higher education trends started with the Bologna Researchers Conference.

¹⁹ www.ehea.info

²⁰ <http://archive.ehea.info/about>

²¹ <http://fohe-bprc.forhe.ro/>

²² <http://link.springer.com/book/10.1007%2F978-94-007-3937-6#section=1049193&page=1>

It is also worth noting that Romanian representatives were active at the international level, as part of various leading Bodies of European level umbrella organisations such as the European University Association (EUA), the European Students' Union (ESU) and Education International (EI), the European Register for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (EQAR) and the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA). This presence amplifies the diffusions of European ideas in the Romanian policy context and enables the European policy processes to take into account issues present in the Romanian higher education sector.

Looking at the elements introduced in this section, it could be argued that Romania is in a definite transition from being a policy downloading country, which primarily exports international norms, to a policy upload actor that also make good use of international arenas to promote its national priorities, which can then in turn be used domestically. Also, it is clear that this strong involvement in supra-national policy arenas has benefited the internal capacity to formulate, implement and assess public policy, even if this needs to be complemented by other tools as well.

5 Conclusions

Romania has been remarkable in its rapid expansion of higher education opportunities and in the ability to mobilise international support for its reforms. From a country with a very restricted higher education sector in communist times, the country transformed into a full-fledged EU member with a higher education sector that includes 92 universities and more than half a million students. Naturally, inherent challenges apply. The present contribution brought forward the context supporting (or applying pressure to) higher education policy making in Romania in the past decades, with due consideration to the main instruments used for grounding policies on solid evidence, including needs assessments and on international good practices.

Even though policy makers have been making use of a variety of tools to ensure evidence based policymaking, Romanian realities reaffirm that the higher education community is in need of continuous debate and involvement on key areas of debate; no reform has a straightforward implementation without ownership of the sector. Moreover, political consensus needs to go beyond formalism. Education is not a sector that can be meaningfully reformed within an electoral cycle and a broad political consensus on the way forward is the only way to ensure legal stability and sustainable policies.

In a context in which the latest education law (Law 1/2011) is not fully implemented, with several pieces of secondary legislation and even amendments pending, the need for consultation and capacity building is greater than ever. In this sense, a key role has been played by large-scale national projects, which facilitate both implementation and the necessary preparation work for new policy making decisions. Similarly, institutional level projects are bound to provide funding and the organisational framework for an effective grass-roots implementation of

measures deemed important by both universities and national/European authorities. Mutual learning, peer assessment, exchanges of good practice have been proved effective in reducing resistance to change in an area of strategic importance, in which both globalization pressures and national priorities play an important role. Similarly, the experience of international organisations, such as the World Bank or EUA, benefited the system over the years in a way, which has been documented in previous chapters.

Naturally, large-scale European policy transformations, such as the Bologna Process, shaped Romanian higher education, by becoming ‘the image of change’. Even though sometimes the legitimization of higher education reforms was rather negative—what would other European countries say if we would not do this or that—the Bologna Process had a definite impact on the Romanian policy landscape, especially since 2000. Romania’s latest involvement in the steering of this pan-European initiative proves the interest of policy makers in the comparability of the national higher education with systems in other European countries, in international partnerships, while maintaining national specificity and a high level of competitiveness.

In order to better understand the effects of the reforms, if the influences of international organisations and processes, as well as those generated by the Romanian institutional arrangements, the following research articles will focus on themes such as equity in higher education, from various perspectives, internationalization and its effects on Romanian universities, student centred learning, the effectiveness of internal quality assurance mechanisms, student participation as a tool for ownership and sustainability and impact assessment of higher education policies. All authors have been involved in activities that involved desk research and consultations at both national and institutional level and have multiple backgrounds that ensure the diversity and originality of their views. Furthermore, the articles shed light on the innovative research findings within the projects.

As a final remark and as it always happens, there is a lot of commitment to deepen research and embark on new initiatives for furthering the higher education policy work in Romania. This volume, providing food for thought for both practitioners and researchers, is part of a series started with the ‘European Higher Education at the Crossroads: Between the Bologna Process and national reforms’ volume, and will surely continue with other initiatives aimed at improving the body of knowledge on Romanian higher education available for the international research community.

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Online Resources

“Higher Education Evidence Based Policy Making: a necessary premise for progress in Romania” project implemented by the Executive Agency for Higher Education, Innovation and Development Funding (UEFISCDI) - <http://www.politici-edu.ro/?lang=en>.