

## Trends in the Romanian Higher Education System

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### Abstract

*The Romanian Higher Education system is currently facing a mass students drop out that is specific for both Public and Private sectors, leading to a disappearance of Public Universities, while the State ones have a relatively constant number. The system recognizes the fact that some of the State-owned Universities, even though face the same challenge, manage to increase their numbers of subscriptions. The article analyses the performance of four of the leading universities in Romania and tries to diagnose their management issues that lead to a high difference of their evolution and performance. By using the method of grounded theory, the research uses resources as universities and ministries reports, as well as website information and national and international statistics. Results show that a better/lack of adaptation for the studies programs to the requirements of the labor market is the key for the current evolution and involution of the four subjects.*

**Key words:** university, global actor, management, crisis

**J.E.L. classification:** I23

### 1. Introduction

Along time, university was subject to a permanent transformation, in order to better serve for the needs of the society, going from traditional to virtual. The Higher Education system transformations can only be described by two words: evolution and revolution (Duderstadt, 1997, p. 3), with a special view over the newly-introduced concepts of virtual universities that risk the loss of the sense of the academic communities due to an increase in specializations and an imbalance among the research vs. teaching.

After a long process of surviving in an unstable political and economic environment, the romanian universities face a major crisis, based on a cumulus of factors that tend to be specific for each of them.

As part of the top Romanian educational system, the Universitaria Consortium (as Bucharest University, Babes-Boylai University from Cluj-Napoca, West University from Timisoara and Alexandru Ioan Cuza University from Iasi) seeks for achieving performance and innovation, focusing on research and development.

### 2. Literature review

The idea of University was at first created by Sheldon Rothblatt (1997. P. 17), a concept very different from previous views – an institution whose activity varies according to the social and political context, based on a need and not on an philosophical idea, despite the fact that in Europe, the university institutional background is the second oldest after the church.

The contemporary idea of university system implies a variety of integrated dimensions like knowledge, adoption of a cultural function for the society, completing the traditional common university functions, an environment based on cultural values with a vital role for the community.

In a contemporary university environment, we consider that Victor's Balridge (1971, p. 6) arguments still stand: he argued that sociologists and administration theorists did not succeed in their work for constructing appropriate intellectual models when about academic performance analysis. The author presents three models – the university of governance, the bureaucratic and the collegial and finally a new political model, as ways of analyze and understand the academic dynamic within universities.

As a paradigm, the university environment was for a long time a neglected area of study for researchers and theorists, their interests being turned out mostly over businesses and government agencies performances and achievements, developing administrative models and leaving behind one of the most important subject of all: universities administration, issues and concerns.

Reconstructing mentally processes and behaviors specific for universities on a miniature scale would represent as Thomas Kuhn (2012, p. x) would claim, a reconstruction of reality on a miniature scale. On the XXIst century environment, the way selected by scientists when dedicating a research for the universities environment is critical to the research, because it will greatly influence aspects like type of issues selected for study, the theoretical perspective adopted and also the evidence accepted as being relevant for the case.

Except for the bureaucratic, collegial and political models that were previously mentioned, in the relevant literature there are other views: (1) the ones that consider an university as a singular institution Humboldt, Newman, Y. Gasset (Esteban et. al., 2016) and (2) views over the universities as being an part of a dedicated system: educational, social or other, where an university is an seen as a singular isolated actor.

For this paperwork, we will consider the contemporary idea of university as follows: (1) at first, all universities (despite different categories, ranks, cultures they are part of, curricula etc) are based on a singular ideal, a base for their individual missions, models, vision, functions for the society. Secondly (2) the paperwork will rally the opinion of Habermas (2009) who considers that it is impossible to include all the universities within a singular global ideal to whol all the universities should relate to. For Europe this idea is not entirely valid, since due to the geoeconomic and geopolitical constructions, the last decades worked in favor of a general university model followed by most of the universities. These general european characteristics are a result of universities collaboration through numerous values and experience share, cooperation and collaboration for achieving excellence; here is why we will name a few of the general values that correspond to the majority of the european universities, including romanian: recognizing in a reflexive method the need for knowledge and all its implications; adding to the three basic functions of the universities (teaching, research and services) the new idea of adopting, performing and promoting of a new cultural function of universities and not at last, assuming by universities of a distinct leading role that accompanies the traditions and perpetual values.

For the public institutions, public funding is generally related with the number of the registered students. There are also other type of arrangements taken into account, like the type or level of programs, but the numbers stay as an essential feature. As a general rule, the large universities require for a considerable part of founding, investing in a variety of all levels programs that result in achieving performance. On the other side, the smaller universities lean towards being teaching institutions, their programs behind destined mostly for the undergraduate (De Groof et. al., 2004, p. 18).

Although without any chance of proving and quoting this saying, we consider as being very relevant for the purpose of this paperwork the idea of Einstein that claims that there is no problem that can be solved by using the exact same level of consciousness that created it (Granados, 2015). Not only in Europe the higher education system is currently facing an increasing number of challenges specific for national, international and also institutional levels. There are two main challenges for the universities acting internationally: first refers to the role of supranational organizations and their influence in regard with general rules and norms governing legislative aspects that may encourage improvements and trends relevant for the management of public institutions. The second aspect regards the encouragement of international collaboration and cooperation among universities, by sharing knowledge and educational innovation. The European Commission (2014, p. 23) in one of its strategies in regard with the european (EU) university environment tries to promote new technologies, new pedagogies, stressing over the need for the

current models of higher education in EU to promote on-line delivered programs, but also encouraging institutions to keep and improve the traditional students attending traditional courses.

Here is a selection of the most important general challenges for the universities and other higher education institutions: (1) the need for improving and adapting more efficient models of resources management (as human or economic) and also a more transparent internal democracy system; (2) encouraging changes for the knowledge creation – as promoting interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary approaches both on educational and also institutional management; (3) inserting/adopting/accepting new teaching and learning methods with the aim of integrating critical/creative thinking; (4) the fourth aspect regards information and communication technologies and also (5) becoming more aware about social responsibility actions and knowledge transfer-mechanisms.

The stakeholders needs in regard with the Romanian Universities do not only cover general values like tradition and responsible attitude, but their values should be oriented towards quality, competency, fairness, collegiality, cooperation and communication (Nica, Nestian, Leon, 2014, p.1) considered as essential values for the success of the institutional practices. This perspective admits the fact that universities have transformed into life long learning organizations, where knowledge management is the main tool for running this environment and where a more entrepreneurial leadership style (Maric, 2013, p. 217) for the management teams is recommended.

### **3. Methodological Approach**

The purpose of this study is to determine which of the Consortia members have better chances for achieving performance, measured through two key-factors: the number of students and the number of specializations (majors) for each of the four cases.

Starting with the idea that each University performance is analyzed from a stakeholder perspective, the research has the next hypotheses: (1) the number of universities in Romania is continuously decreasing; (2) while the number of public universities is constant, the private universities are disappearing; (3) the number of students in Romania is subject to an annual decrease; (4) not all the universities are affected by this students crisis.

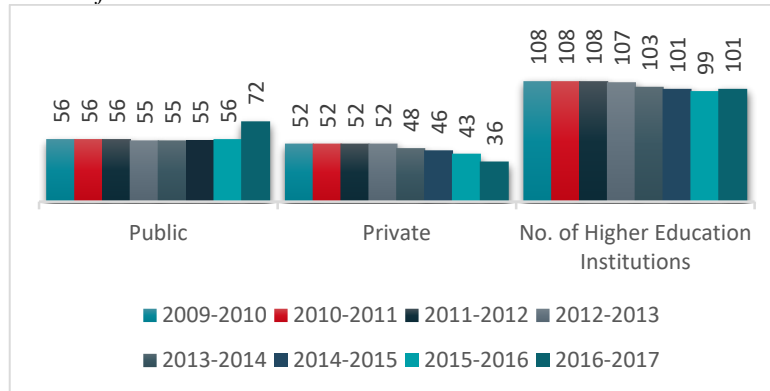
As a qualitative study, the research method used was the grounded theory, completed with a case study concerning four of the top romanian universities: Bucharest University, Babes-Boylai University from Cluj-Napoca, West University from Timisoara and Alexandru Ioan Cuza University from Iasi.

### **4. The University Environment of Romania**

The romanian tertiary educational system is based on the functioning of Universities (Ministerul Educatiei, 2017) divided as following: 55 State Universities, 36 Private Universities, 7 Military Universities and 10 other institutions that are temporary accredited to functioning (foundations, cultural institutes etc.). covering 38 counties and Bucharest, the public educational system can be found across 48 cities, while the private one can be found in only 22 cities and one rural location (M. E. N., 2016, p. 4).

For the period 2010-2017 Romania was characterized by a descendent rate for the Higher Education, caused at first by a decrease in the number of universities and private faculties, in parallel with keeping constant parameters for the State Higher Education. The academic year 2015-2016 marked the most important decrease of private faculties number (with 22 less than the previous year).

Graph no. 1. Number of Universities in Romanian Public and Private Universities



Source: own calculations based on Ministerul Educatiei Nationale din Romania

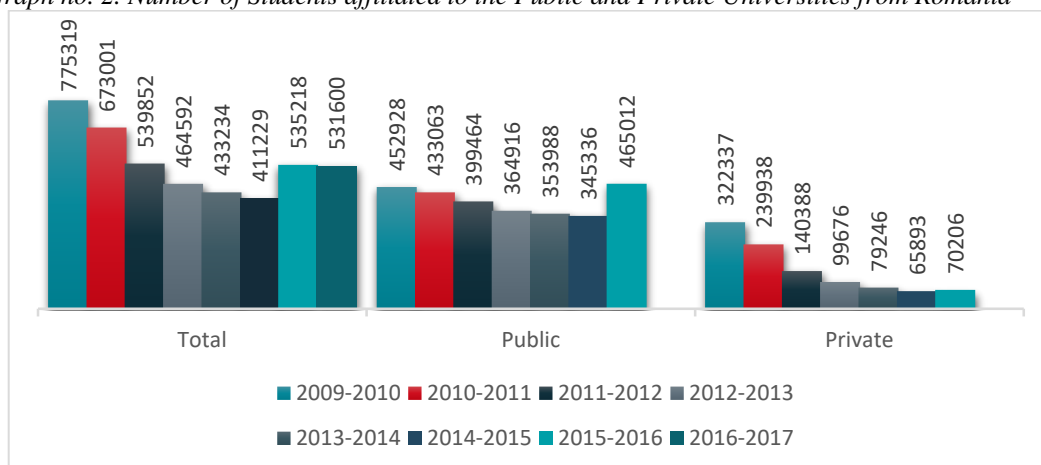
It is important to mention that for the period 2016-2017 we counted as Public Higher Education Institutions and the provisory accredited Institutions and Foundations that collaborate and develop activities under State Universities tutoring.

It is important to define the students number increase/decrease across the considered time period, in order to see if these numbers will follow the same pattern as the one of the universities.

Data shows that starting with the 2009-2010 academic year, both public and private Universities suffered great losses concerning students numbers. The crisis year was 2014-2015 when in Romania was registered the smallest number of students within the last 17 years. Both public and private environments were affected but, while the number of State Universities was kept constant, the private university sector suffered an implosion, reaching in the period 2015-2016 to less than ¼ of the number of students from 2009-2010.

The phenomena is still a subject for research, the causes that determined romanian pupils not to enroll for tertiary educational environment are not entirely clear. The literature connects at first the negative effect of the lack of the uniformity of the high-school exams and subjects of study, that create insecurity among students, determining them not to desire a Bachelor Degree.

Graph no. 2. Number of Students affiliated to the Public and Private Universities from Romania



Source: own calculations based on Ministerul Educatiei Nationale din Romania

Another cause may be the borders opening after Romania's EU integration: it is clear that a great loss in the higher education sphere belongs to the private Universities, whose previous students were searching for a certain education quality and that showed preference for leaving the country and work instead of staying in and study. Among other potential causes we count the lack of training for the students that receive a Bachelor's Degree and only have theoretical and not a practical background and also the decision of the Romanian Ministry of Education of eliminating all the Technical schools chosen by many for training after graduating high-school. We consider

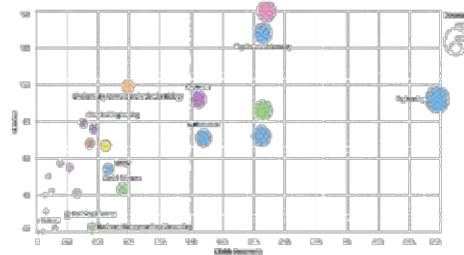
that this factor was standing first of all at the base of the unrealistic inflow of students before 2010, since the targeted segment of population was always the same: low-average graded high-school students that did not have the chance of continuing their education after high-school than in a public-private university and to whom once given the chance of working/achieving experience abroad, chose this pathway, to the detriment of universities.

It is important to mention here that Romania is subject to a negative flow of nationals studying abroad, compared to the number of foreigners that choose Romania as a Higher Education destination.

## 5. The Romanian Higher Education Actors: Case Study

Although the romanian educational system showed a constant progress over the last decades, by increasing the institutional performance and the students results, it was shown that in Romania there is a limited number of students to whom it is given the chance of achieving educational performance (Kitchen et. al., 2017, p. 16). There results depend on the fields of study and educational performance, where Romania shows a preference for Medicine, Phisics and Astronomy, Engineering, Energy or Social Sciences, as the map for the research on national level shows:

Graph no. 3. Research Areas in Romania (2015-2016)



Source: Scimago Journal&Country Rank

Comparing Romania's research map with the one of East Europe, it is easy to see that Romania occupies a middle position when about H Index.

Graph no. 4. Romania's research map (H Index)



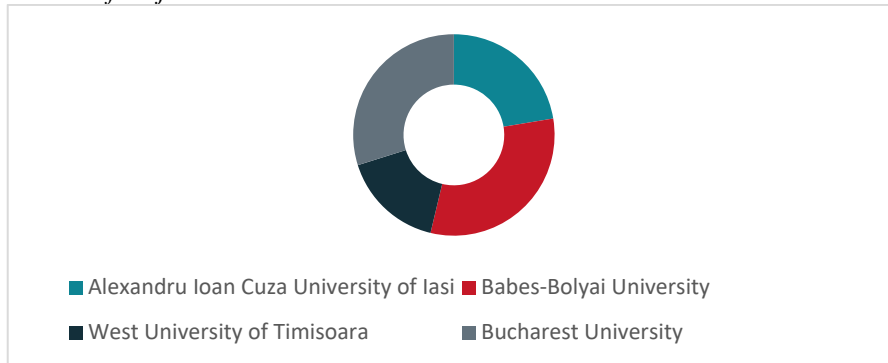
Source: Scimago Journal&Country Rank

Romanian Universities generally have middle position when about international rankings – Academic Ranking of World Universities, Center of World Universities Rankings, Leiden Ranking, Performance Ranking of Scientific Papers of World Universities, Scimago Institutions Ranking, Times Higher-Education World University Rankings, University Ranking by Academic Performance and continuing. The data shows that Romania is internationally visible only through 15 Universities, among which only 5 comply with the requirements of being world-class.

Amongst the most important universities in Romania are West University of Timisoara, Babes-Bolyai University, University of Bucharest and also Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iasi. As four of the most important educational actors in Romania, the four Universities followed the national pattern in regard with the decrease of students numbers starting with 2010.

But it is important to also take into consideration that when comparing the numbers for the four entities, one of the most important factors is the number of Faculties for each of it; as the Graph no. 5 explains, Babes Boylai University comprises its activities trough a number of 21 Faculties, and also the higher number of students among the 4 subjects of this study, followed by Bucharest University with 20 Faculties, Alexandru Ioan Cuza from Iasi with 15 Faculties, while West University of Timisoara only runs 11 Faculties and also the smallest no. of students/year.

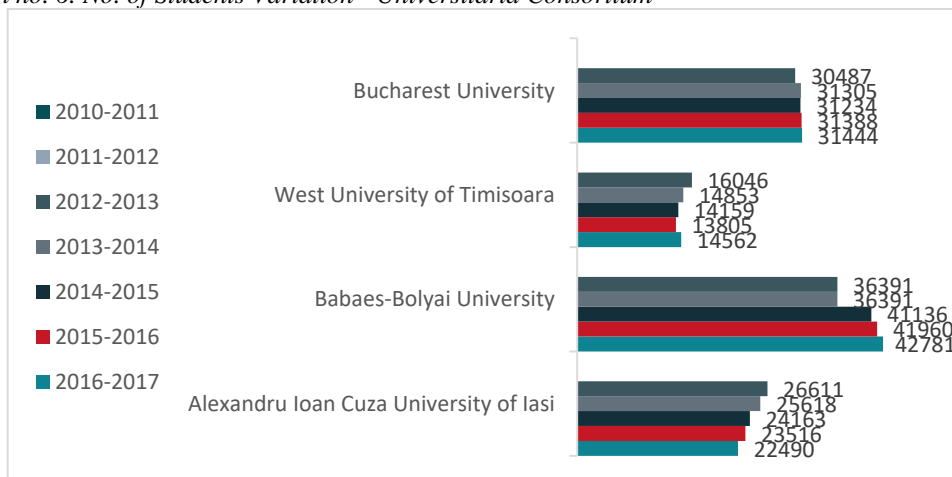
Graph no. 5. No. of Majors - Universitaria Consortium



Source: own calculations based on Universities websites

The subject of this research is to find reasons and solutions for the decrease of the number of students for some of the subjects, and also to analyze the recovery and achieving performance solutions for the others.

Graph no. 6. No. of Students Variation - Universitaria Consortium



Source: adapted after CNFIS 2013

As it can be easily seen, Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iasi is the only University from the 4 studied that shows a descendent pattern starting with 2010, with a no. of students decrease of over 4 Thousand. On the same side of the line, but with a smaller loss is West University of Timisoara that continued to loose students in the period 2010-2015, but that gained almost 1000 students in the period 2016-2017, compared with the previous academic year. A positive trend is also specific for the Bucharest University that starting with 2010 did not follow the national pattern of losing students, but gained slowly. The success case of this research is Babes-Boylai University who's showed a positive pattern in regard with the no. of students for the entire period 2010-2016; an important increase in the students numbers was registered in the academic year 2014-2015, with a surplus of almost 5 thousand students compared with the precedent period of time.

Comparing performance across the four selected universities, from a simple websites survey it can be easily seen that organizational management system for all the cases does not coincide: while the traditional is still prevailing in Universities like Alexandru Ioan Cuza or Bucharest University, the West of the Country presents more innovative strategies, based on needs of the societies; among all, Babes-Boylai University is the only one which proposes for 2017 four new Bachelor Programs.

The main identified problems for the institutional management of these universities include a series of factors are common to the entire national system and that tends to only be solved by some of the management teams; the research showed that at the base of the decrease of the numbers of students in Romania is the decreased natality that will reflect heavily in the following years across the higher-education environment, determining an increase in the quality of teaching and academic performance across universities, but also an increase competition for performing higher education services. The discussion brings into light the fact that some universities continue to increase their number of students, while others suffer losses, within the same background; the explanation follows the a simple pattern: some institutions like Babes Boylai for example have a specific target, following market needs and insertion on the labor market for the next graduates, while other institutions inserted new study areas but imported them from the international higher education environment, without domesticating it.

The second issue identified as being the key for the success of some institutions and the failure for others is the number of sport for students for each specialization/year that varies according to the society needs; none of the universities studied did non manage to perform market needs studies and implement this strategy of variable spots for students for a no. of years, until the market needs are fulfilled, and so, avoiding a surplus of Bachelor Degrees with no insertion to the labor market.

A third key-issue identified as problematic for all the universities is the organizational management that is lacking flexibility and continuity for its actions; the research showed that one of the strategic feature for the organizational functions is creativity and the lack of vision of the entire romanian system, where institutions are not singular actors, but partners that aim for providing the same baseline for the services performed, and tending towards performance.

Another negative driver for all the four universities is represented by the plagiarism public scandals, bribery, different types of harassment and false degrees that are not helping and leading towards performance and that included important names from the organizational systems of the four universities.

Number of specializations offered by each University is a key indicator for their performance; by analysing the data, it was revealed the fact that Babes-Boylai University offers a number of 143 Majors for its 21 Faculties, Alexandu Ioan Cuza University shows an offer of 247 Majors, West University - 75 while University of Bucharest has approx. 100 Majors. Along with the number of students, this is a key indicator for the academic performance of the four universities studied; the data shows the fact that the universities that have the best performances (measured in number of students/year) dropped a large number of specializations and have new academic offers that try to adapt students to the current romanian working environment's needs.

## **6. Recommendations**

The research draws attention over a number of recommendations for all the four Universities studied.

First of all, all the actors need to analyze the current situation considering the values offered to the stakeholders.

A second argument regards the need for the four Universities to establish strategic and operational objectives that will lead to qualitative deliverables: improving universities public image, identifying categories of needs for the stakeholders and developing collaboration strategies with them and also training the employees in regard with the new clients – students of the Universities.

For a better and a faster adaptation process, the four actors need to create structures that will coordinate and monitor the students evolution within the labor market; creating structures that will correlate the students needs and the society needs on long term.

Creating and implementing strategies and operational programs that follow the students and stakeholders needs.

The most important recommendation for the universities is to find motivation for implementing strategies in regard with the labor market – creating partnerships with companies and other representatives, both teacher and students trainings and working experience with partners from the labor market that work outside the borders, and also sensitization of the Education Ministry to better finance Universities activities.

## 7. Conclusions

The romanian educational system is currently facing a crisis that mainly reflect the institutional management system and values. From a strategic point of view, all the universities subscribe to the european strategies, with an effort of achieving performance and fulfilling targets. The four Universities taken into consideration for this study don not entirely follow the national pattern, only one of it suffering a large decrease in number of students enrolled each year. When considering data in regard with the educational offer, the main trait of the four subjects is that they are preparing students only with a theoretical background, not sufficient for the insertion in the current romanian working environment.

It is important to stress out that the universities from the East Romania suffer from a great disadvantage, namely the lack of investments and a limited working environment for the graduates. Despite that, their management system is lacking consistency, and as a basic recommendation, we propose them to renounce on their large numbers of Majors, and find strategies for training students and implementing practical programs inside the labor market for them, in order to gain a competitive advantage.

The west universities are the winners seen as students enrolled for their programs o studies; with a wider managerial view and a relative young team, achieving performance means for these universities to study the labor market necessities and propose for the next generations of students an educational background that fits to their needs.

As a final remark we maintain the idea that the romanian educational system, even though is a part of european strategies and each of its actors follows the objectives of the Europe 2020 Strategy, is on a long distance from achieving international performance and delivering qualitative results. The reasons are diverse, and from a geo-economic point of view, some universities are lacking advantage compared to others; the lack of strategies on a national level reflects their academic performance, and the fear is that increasing competitiveness will prevail the universities reputation and will further health practices that are specific to different management systems from less known institutions.

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