

Sustainability Management in the Higher Educational System

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Abstract

The complex interface between globalization and promoting fundamental standards of labor enjoys increasing attention. The European public attention in connection with this fact reflects a much bigger understanding of the globalization impact, an interest much more pronounced towards the economic relations and the understanding of the fact that an important part of the population wants to gain something more than money. There is a universal recognition of the fundamental labor standards. In Europe is recognized that sustainable economic growth goes hand in hand with social cohesion – which means respect for fundamental labor standards – and that is fundamental for EU's economic and social policy. From this perspective, the present article aims to highlight the importance of Romania's employment policy in relation to the EU policy and the importance of investing in education from the perspective of sustainable development in the labor market in higher education, as well as especially the sustainability of the Romanian higher education itself.

Keywords: cohesion policy, durable (sustainable) development, employment policies, unemployment rate, sustainable higher education

J.E.L. classification: I25, I28, M54

1. Introduction

The cohesion policy is the main investment policy of EU. This policy addresses every region and city of EU supporting the creation of jobs, the competitiveness of enterprises, economic growth and sustainable development and helps improve the quality of life.

European investments which contribute to the fulfillment of this policy are significant, between 2014-2020 approximately 381.8 billion euros (approximately a third of EU's budget) being allocated in this sense. Taking into account the private investments, the impact of this policy for the 2014-2020 period is at approximately 450 billion euros.

The cohesion policy stays at the basis of European solidarity being the first tool that supports states less developed to recover and / or reduce economic, social and territorial gaps. In this sense, the cohesion policy has priorities such as: job occupancy and education, research, innovation, but also development.

2. Literature review

When it comes to cohesion policies within the EU and their appliance within the educational system there are very view detailed researches regarding this particular topic. However key finding can be related to this field by understanding the main concepts regarding the EU's framework on cohesion policies, but also understanding the corporate governance and sustainability process. While some authors (Voicu-Dan Dragomir) focus on the importance of the beneficiaries of the process, such as the main institutions that benefit from the process, others (Ancuța-Mirela Mirea) focus their attention on the importance of labour markets in the cohesion policy making within the EU. Further, most of the authors focus their general view over the process as a whole, rather than

applying it to a certain case such as focusing their efforts on a particular research such as sustainable management in higher educational systems, such as the Romanian one.

3. Research methodology

The research methodology involves establishing a clear link between the importance of cohesion policies within the EU, the Romanian National Policy in the field of employment in compliance with the Europe's 2020 Strategy and the evolution of higher education in Romania After 1989. The first goal is to establish the evolution of the sustainable development process in the higher educational system in Romania. The second goal of this article is to establish what the future holds for the sustainable development process in the higher educational system in Romania as things stand. The studies that will be used and the statistics will explain that the sustainable process is highly volatile when it comes to public universities and even more, when it comes to private universities.

4. The Importance of Cohesion Policy in the EU

The main accomplishments of this policy are the creation of jobs, economic development, investments in people (regarding job occupancy), enterprise support, innovation and research consolidation, improvement of transport and of the surrounding environment.

Through three main funds cohesion policy objectives are being achieved:

- **European Regional Development Fund (ERDF)**, which aims to strengthen economic and social cohesion by investing in sectors that increase development for generating a higher level of competitiveness and job creation.

- **European Social Fund (ESF)**, through which it is aimed at the investment in people and puts its emphasis on developing opportunities in employment and education. Much more, this fund has into account even the support of the most deprived persons that are facing the risk of poverty, but also the risk of social exclusion.

- **Cohesion Fund** invests in ecological development, but also in sustainable development and in improving interconnectivity between member states.

There need to be an understanding of the fact that the European cohesion policy supports and aims achievements of investments in the field of education, of professional training and of teaching throughout a lifetime, the promotion of quality jobs in the academic environment, but also aims strengthening research. Another main goal of the European cohesion policy is to support technological development and innovation, improving access to information, but also to communication technology, as well as improving their use and quality. Therefore amongst the main beneficiaries we can count the public organisms that are involved in education, universities, NGO's and other volunteer organizations. (Dragomir, 2015)

5. The Romanian National Policy in the Field of Employment in Compliance with the Europe 2020 Strategy

In order to react to the permanent tendency of rising unemployment in the EU, the Commission has launched in April of 2012 a set of measures that form the so called *Employment Package*, which targets:

- The encouragement of creating new jobs through: reduction of taxing the labor force; the efficient use of employment subsidies; exploitation of potential key sectors such as ecological economy, information and communication technology, medical assistance;

- Restoration of the dynamics of the labor market: supporting workers that want to change their job or to reintegrate in the work force; mobilizing every actors that are involved in actions such as implementing necessary reforms; making targeted investments in developing skills on the basis of a better anticipation or supervision of the market needs; promoting the free movement of labor;

- Strengthening the governance process in labor policies through: improving their monitoring system, together with member states, to guarantee that the social aspects and the ones regarding occupying the labor force benefits from the same attention just like the economic ones.

At that date, Romania has identified a series of specific challenges to the labor market and those were:

- **Demographic:** a slow and continuous process of decreasing Romanian population (negative natural growth and negative balance of mobility and external migration); reduction of the total amount of active population and ageing of the labor force;

- **Labor market participation:** increased share of population occupied with agriculture; reducing the level of participation in the labor market of women in comparison with men; increasing of the level of poverty risk and social exclusion and, especially, in-work poverty; high level of unemployment amongst younger people, and last but not least, having a higher share of long term unemployed within the total amount of unemployed; (Mirea, 2011)

- **Labor force competencies and the state involvement in the learning process throughout an individual's lifetime:** the level of educational labor force (15 years and above) has decreased in comparison with the EU average; a very low level of use of ICT by the population, also a very limited role of ICT use in the economy; the decreased participation in learning programs throughout life; insufficient funds and measures for fiscal stimulation, addressed both to employers but also to employees in the field of continuous professional formation;

- **Active measures of employment:** short level of investment and reduced participation of the unemployed and other vulnerable categories of the labor market to active measures of occupation; training measures in the total of active measures occupy a second place; insufficient surveillance of the impact of active measures over diverse groups that are addressed.

Thus Romania's action in this sense has been in achieving a sustainable level of employment sustained by a competitive economy, social cohesion and sustainable development. One of the key scopes for 2020 is reaching a percentage of 70% rate of occupation of work force for the group of people between 20-64 years old.

In regard to the conditioning in achieving this objective in education it was wanted to:

- Reduce educational abandonment and early leaving of school. There also needs to be an implementation of programs for people who have a low level of education;

- The increase of quality within process of education, having focus on the skills that need to be obtained for the development of a professional career;

- Correlate the educational program (middle level and higher level) with the current needs and the perspectives of labor market.

6. The Evolution of Higher Education in Romania After 1989

The reform within the higher education system in Romania began in the year of 1993. The first step was the establishment of a legal framework for then need of accrediting higher education institutions, but also for the need of recognition of diplomas. To goal was to preserve certain national quality standards. Every high education institution operating in December 1989 was considered accredited and therefore only passed through the regular external evaluation process every five years. State and private higher education institutions set up after 1990 have had to apply for provisional authorization, followed by the accreditation process. (Deneş & Radu, 2011)

All regulations on authorization, accreditation and periodic evaluation have been applied equally to all state and private education institutions. (Istrate, 2012)

Making sure that the quality of the educational process has been achieved and continues to be carried out at the level of the university specializations, but also and/or at the level of the institutional structures. Regular assessment of accredited programs and institutions involves observing the quality increase, observing the improvement of institutional capacity to perform quality management. (Chivu, 2018)

EU has decided on a major legal framework through which the European states have created a Single European Area of Higher Education.

This framework is also known as the Bologna Process but also the Sorbonne Declaration, and its aim is to harmonize all of the architecture of the European higher education system, which can be achieved by establishing a common higher education system based on certain levels of education (Bachelor, Master, Doctorate) as well as by enhancing the mobility of students, teachers, recognition of academic titles and qualifications. (Chivu, 2018)

7. Sustainable Development in the Higher Educational System in Romania

If initially the term of sustainable development was designed to be a solution to the ecological crisis caused by the intense industrial exploitation of resources, later the term got picked up in all fields, so that today's sustainable development concept is referring to three essential aspects, namely: ecological balance, economical security and social equity. (Dragomir, 2015)

Consequently, the concept of sustainable development has an understanding of having all the forms and methods of socio-economic development, and also has a foundation primary to maintain a balance between the socio-economic systems and all of the elements of natural capital.

With regard to education, "*sustainable development is globally recognized as a critical platform that allows all sectors of society how to learn and to manage change and make the transition to sustainable practice*". Thus, more and more emphasis is being placed on the role of the formal education sector, the need of partnership with the community, as a key player in facilitating the education of society, "*needed to meet the growing challenges posed by the environmental and social components of sustainable development*". (Benn & Dunphy, 2007)

Thus in society there is a large expectation that universities must play an important role in facilitating education which enables current and future generations so that they redesign their personal and professional activities in order to create a sustainable future.

At the level of the Romanian higher education system, sustainability was transposed into the administrative evolution of certain processes and activities. There was always a need of the fundamental and durable increase of the quality of the services offered by the Romanian universities (state or private). The major goal of sustainability in the higher education was to create graduates that are well trained, both a theoretic and practice perspective, in order to meet the real needs expressed in the labor market, needs that are continuously changing, especially due to technical and technological progress.

According to UNESCO, "*Universities must act as research and learning centers of sustainability [...] higher education should be an engine in this respect by practicing what it teaches by making investments and sustainable facilities that are integrated into teaching and learning [...] higher Education should focus on systemic, interdisciplinary, experiential approaches based on investigative, problem-solving and critical thinking.*" (UNESCO, 2004)

An important attempt to define what "sustainable university" means was made in 1990 by the Talloires declaration. Jean Mayer, president of Tufts University – Boston, who invited 22 rectors in Talloires, France to express his fears regarding the state of the world. He then conducted a process that ended up with the conceiving of a document identifying key actions that universities must make for a sustainable future.

"Universities educate most individuals responsible for the development and organization of social institutions. For this reason, universities have a huge responsibility to enhance the awareness, knowledge, development of the technologies and tools needed to create a sustainable environmental future." (The Report and Statement of Presidents Conference, 1990)

In the context of sustainable development, the role of higher education is currently limited to:

- The education of students by helping them so that they can acquire knowledge of the world they live in and of the complex interaction between all factors (economic, social and environmental etc.)

- Identifying social and technical solutions to the challenges posed by sustainable development

- Taking the position of a catalyst for learning about sustainable development, beyond the barriers of higher education, by exchanging knowledge and ideas with the local communities, the business environment, government and other authorities, and respectively the whole world.

At a European level, the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) is an umbrella organization representing quality assurance organizations from the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) member states. ENQA helps promote European cooperation. This cooperation takes place in the field of quality assurance in higher education. It aims to disseminate information and expertise among its members and stakeholders and to develop and share good practices. It also aims to foster the European dimension of quality assurance.

In Romania the role of ENQA is being played by the Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance Higher Education which can:

- certify, on the basis of quality standards, the capacity of education providing education organizations to meet the expectations of their beneficiaries
- it can also contribute to the development of an institutional culture, in order to ensure the quality of higher education
- ensure that the direct beneficiaries of study programs are being protected at the level of higher education by producing and disseminating systematic, coherent and credible, publicly accessible information about the quality of education
- develop proposals addressed to the Ministry of Education certain strategies and policies that will allow continuous improvement of the quality of higher education, in close correlation with the pre-university education system.

Sustainable development in the Romanian university system implies:

- Creating campuses – laboratories for learning about sustainable development
- Active involvement of students in the development of the university and society
- Enriching interdisciplinary knowledge, skills and aptitudes to identify and solve problems in the spirit of sustainable development
- The formation of active, well informed citizens in a global economy, taking into account the evolution of the technological process.

In Romania, according to a report of the Ministry of National Education, the number of students has decreased dramatically since the academic year 2010/2011. If at the level of the academic year 2009/2010 the number of enrolled students was 775300, at the end of the academic year 2015/2016 the number of students was less than 410700.

Table no.1 Number of students at a Bachelor level in Romania, from 2009 to 2016 (thousands)

	2009/ 2010	2010/ 2011	2011/ 2012	2012/ 2013	2013/ 2014	2014/ 2015	2015/ 2016
No. of students at a Bachelor level (total)	775,3	673,0	539,9	464,6	433,2	411,2	410,7
Public universities	453,0	433,1	399,5	364,9	354,0	345,3	351,5
Private universities	322,3	239,9	140,4	99,7	79,2	65,9	59,2

Source: elaborated based data provided by the *Raport of the Educational Ministry regarding the Superior Educational System (2016)*, available at:

https://www.edu.ro/sites/default/files/_fi%C8%99iere/Minister/2017/transparenta/Stare_sup%20%202016.pdf

The drastic decrease in the number of students is due to the measures taken to improve the surveillance of the B.A. Exam, which has dropped by 50% the number of high school graduates in Romania over the same period. The number of people enrolled in vocational schools increased by more than 100000 in the academic year 2016/2017. In addition, the percentage of foreign students doubled compared to the academic year 2009/2010. At the beginning of the academic year 2017/2018, a total number of 538900 students were enrolled in the Romanian higher education process.

Private universities had most to suffer, with a total of 10 institutions being closed in the last 8 years.

The unemployment rate in Romania is however below the European average (7.3% the EU average in 2018), while in Romania this was 3.31% in December 2018. With the exception of Ilfov County (Bucharest) and Iași County, all the other counties holding the largest number of students in the country have the lowest unemployment rate, namely: Timiș (1,02%), Cluj (2%), Arad (1,5 %), Sibiu (2,4 %), Bihor (2,4 %), Brașov (2,8%).

8. Conclusions

Romanian universities have been subjected, even without their will, to a competitive environment in the last ten years, which has put them in the need to develop and operate sustainably, to have a strategy to attract and retain students. If there were rigorous admission processes ten years ago, the number of student being nearly double and faculties having the option to choose their students, today the ratio has been reversed and the students are the ones with options, universities being the ones who need to develop their infrastructure and offer more, in such a way to attract students (Romanian or foreign ones).

Universities have had to ensure the evaluation, review and updating of the offered curriculum, teachers and all the services provided. Private universities have suffered the most, their number of students has dropped five times in the last ten years, notably because they have not been able to compete with state universities and the facilities they offer.

In the context of a very low unemployment rate compared to the European average, Romania will soon see itself forced to import labor force, so Romanian universities will have to concentrate their efforts on attracting foreign students. The sustainability process of the whole academic environment is of major importance in the Romanian educational system, with private universities being threatened with extinction.

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